THE GRAMMAR YEARS

Town and School: Bexhill-on-Sea in the 1940's

John Pratt

A Red Brick Alley Production

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about my experience of the years 1944-1951, from the time I started at Bexhill Grammar School for Boys, aged 11 until I left that school in 1951, then 18.The story is in three parts: SCHOOL, TOWN and HOME, each recalling characters and incidents, places and institutions that made my life the way it was then. Perhaps the most significant part of this is the first, for it was those school days that taught me how to think and to express ideas, enough to see the larger picture, seek more opportunities to learn and achieve.

Yet much of the SCHOOL section is about my teachers and what they did or didn't do for me. I am slightly uncomfortable about revealing their shortcomings and mishaps in the hope that it might entertain or amuse, but it also gives me pleasure to applaud their contributions in setting standards, and acquiring the disciplines of learning.

And yet this is no great success story, either. I hardly distinguished myself in all those years and left, as I say later, with a whimper rather than a bang. But it is also about perseverance, inspiration, good mates and enjoying competition.

Although, as teenagers, we complained about the TOWN being full of old people and lacking life, in fact the reverse was true. There were plenty of opportunities, both sporting and social. The adrenalin rushes ranged from those in competitive rowing in regattas around the coast, to Saturday night dances at the De La Warr Pavilion. The cinema, too, was a central part of my life in the forties.

My HOME until 1951 was where we ate and slept with security and comfort. The legacy of my father's exposure to the First World War, especially his deafness (which I have written about in A Boy's War, printed in 2012), sometimes hung over us, but our house was usually a happy and purposeful place. It was always open to visitors and friends and for years my brother Reg, and myself used the "attic" as a more or less exclusive den for us and our mates. 9, Windsor Road and the town of Bexhill-on-Sea is very different today; the Grammar School on Turkey Road has disappeared altogether. It is all, as they say, history!
and that is my starting point ..

Part 1: SCHOOL

Iron Railings

Let's begin with the iron railings, rising five feet or more with a decorative post top for each section. Black, they were and still are as the only remaining parts of the structure that was once the Bexhill Grammar Schools. I am glad to see those railings still there. I am also sad that my heritage, an institution that was a major influence in making me what I became, who I am, has been torn down to provide residential housing. I had no opportunity to say my farewells, to share my regrets with fellow old boys. Most of us lived too far away to keep up with local developments and before I knew it the school was gone! At the time I put it like this:

Old School Ties.

Site cleared; no-one here
knows of art or science, house or honours board:
groundless as if they never were.
Scattered red bricks,
drains still seeping sediment
of walls that held my mother's dreams:
her son up at the Grammar School,
getting on.

A kind of shell, a time of incubation
learning the language of the place,
to reason, calculate, fly with an idea.
I never doubted they were right –
my young ways less than their truth
so willingly I wore that shield

now displaced by rows of dinky houses,
cheap footings stamped on famous fields;
hung laundry to obscure the gold leaf
of exhibitioners and lordly captains;
Shakespeare and Moliere mocked
by easy slots from Coronation Street.

Back then, when I first set foot, the railings played their part. They put space between us and the hoi polloi. There was no easy access to the school. You couldn't take a short cut over a low wall, across a front lawn. The only way in was via the heavy iron gate, one for the Boys School and at the other end, another for the Girls. You would have to establish your identity, prove your suitability before passing through the entrance. Already there was a message about the orthodox, the traditional, established values. This was an institution that separated, contained, distinguished itself; here the air was rarified, the work superior; here we were better and aspiring to be the best. In local parlance we were 'up at the Grammar School' in contrast to being 'down in the Town'. The geography, too, seemed to be significant. I used to bike to school and it was an uphill ride for most of the way!

In 1944, though, the demise of the Grammar School was more than half a century away and in nobody's thoughts. It was an achievement to have passed the entrance examination and a privilege to be through those gates.

Classrooms

On the first day of the first term I found myself in a classroom at the corner of the quadrangle nearest to the entrance. We were in Form 2A, but only just in. The classrooms collectively formed the sides of a square, It turned out that one's progress to higher classes as one grew older and presumably more learned, was rather like that around a Ludo or Monopoly board. One day, in six years time, we might inhabit the sanctum of the Sixth form on the

fourth and closing side of the square. Here, more civilised chairs and tables replaced desks, where one could choose to study independently or otherwise fritter time away self indulgently when not actually timetabled to be somewhere else.

For now, we were the new boys, the first years, the lowest in rank, pecking order or just about any other measure of status you could think of. Except, that is, we were not actually known as the First Year or Form 1. The forms were named, with one or two odd exceptions, in an ascending order up to the Fifth , so one might well have expected, as a mere beginner, to be in Class 1 but we were actually in 2A or 2B. No question about it we had already, somehow or other, skipped number 1. In 2A and 2B, also in an unquestioning state of mind, an all-embracing acceptance of all that was greater and better than ourselves it never occurred that there might properly have been a 1A and a 1B. Who decided we should be called '2'? What was wrong with '1'? Maybe we were the rising 10+2's, in which case when we began our second year we would become the 3's. Again there was a strange buck to the system. As rising thirteen year-olds we then became pupils in Remove A or Remove B!

New Teachers

Of course we no longer had just one class teacher for all subjects as we had done in the person of Tommy Mitchell in our last year at St. Barnabas Boys' School, back in the town. Here we entertained a different teacher for each subject, Messrs D'Elboux for English, T. B. Williams for History and Geography, C. Baldock for Physics, R. Ruffhead for French and so on. Entertained, I say; perhaps so, at least in the fact that for most of the time our class stayed put in the 2A form room whilst our subject teachers came to visit us in turn, In any other respect I doubt that we entertained them. The entertainers, the jokers, the rebels among us had not yet emerged. The discipline was generally observed and we

were still treading cautiously, working out what was required of us as new boys must.

Before our first class in the morning or afternoon actually started, or after the morning break, we were supervised by prefects – sixth formers whose records somehow justified them for this regulatory role in charge. Mostly, as we drifted in from the playground or from our arrival in school, a prefect was on hand to tell us to sit down and shut up. The more thoughtful ones encouraged us to get ready for the next lesson, to read or complete unfinished homework. At any event, by the time our particular teacher arrived we were expected to be ready for work, attentive and respectful. Moreover his (there was no her) entry had to be recognised by our standing up from our seats.

A particular incident stands out among these prefected preliminaries to the start of a teaching period. One morning we were under the eagle eyes of two of the most senior young men in the school, both prominent sportsmen and house captains – minor gods to us short-trousered novices. One of them was "Cocoa" Brown, my own House Captain, footballer extraordinary among other sporting distinctions. He and his sixth form colleague were prowling up and down the aisles between the rows of desks we inhabited, waiting as usual for some tardy teacher who may well have been having the last couple of drags on a cigarette before setting out to get the wheels of education turning once again.

I must have slipped into a covert conversation with my immediate neighbour, thus contravening the most elementary requirement they demanded of us – that we were not to talk. I believe that a prefect's performance was judged by the incoming masters almost entirely on his ability to maintain order, including silence up to and especially during the teacher's impending entrance. Some commanded this respect; others, hopelessly ineffective, tolerated a high volume of chatter and defiant movement around the classroom when supposedly overseeing our sitting quiet and

ready at our desks. The first thing I knew was a blow on the back of my head so heavy that my whole upper body rotated forward until my face actually came in contact with the top of the desk in front of me. This revered captain of Arundel House – my house, this demi-god Cocoa, had clumped me with a heavy book. What a shock! My head was still spinning, at least in confusion as to the purpose or justice of this punishment as from the blow itself. He obviously hadn't recognised me as one of his own, nor should I have expected him to. Nevertheless the punishment seemed excessive and I spent the rest of that day smarting from his impulsive action.

In today's litigious Britain perhaps my Dad would have responded to the very next persuasive demand on TV that if he knew of a situation where someone had suffered physical and/or psychological hurt from the wilful or careless action of others, there was big money in it for both of us. Just ring this (easy to remember) number, like 900,000, and a posse of razor sharp lawyers would be on the case only seconds later, getting every last arguable penny out of the offending party who should and must pay for his injurious behaviour!

Pigs might fly! If I had dared to mention that day's event to him– and I probably didn't –I am sure he would have quickly sided with the establishment view that, in the first, second, and every subsequent unequivocal case, I was in the wrong, possibly adding his own extended moral instruction or personal recollection to overload the case against me, whilst I would be wishing I never mentioned it.

Clarence ('Snag') Baldock

Many of the masters at Turkey Road were memorable. Some stood out as characters, as good teachers or as exponents of more unusual ways of influencing our development, while others remain uncertain, indistinct or now unrecognisable from their names on a school list dated 1945 or 1950. Even those masters we saw three times a week for more than a year are in some cases still little more than blank faces in my mind's eye.

Just as that applied to a certain few, so is it exactly the opposite for a number of others, whose appearance, style of teaching, voice and mannerisms seem almost as fresh as they ever were. One such was a certain C. P. W. Baldock, Esq. House Master of Battle House and physics teacher, otherwise known as Clarence or 'Snag' for reasons to be explained.

Snag was an unforgiving authoritarian. He knew his subject, assumed that we, correspondingly, would soon know it too. It appeared a straightforward business for both parties. He would address the whole class in clear and unambiguous tones; state exactly what procedure was required of us in the name of science, step by transparent step so that we were logically able to arrive at some irrevocable conclusion. And there it was! The road to insight and understanding, the trail to blazing inspiration following Archimedes own eureka moment was suddenly right there in front of us. His succinct and once-and-for-all instructions left no room for doubters.

The only condescension he allowed was a final uplifting challenge to us all, just in case it was possible that one of the slower brethren had missed a detail here or there. After all we were the 'A' stream, the upper crust, so to speak, so that the idea that we were not all, at this point, perfectly well instructed, beautifully poised and eager to proceed to roll back the boundaries of scientific endeavour, appeared not have crossed his mind. But just in case, and before we

were cast adrift to the benches and Bunsen burners or the gallery of balance scales he would always say 'Any snags?' Was it possible that anybody had somehow failed to make sense of this procedure? Failed to grasp each deliberate step of this wholly logical and essentially straightforward investigation? Our response, or rather a lack of one, was respectful silence, apparently not.

Of course it was a case of pluralistic ignorance where no one understands, but each one thinks that everyone else understands. So we shuffled reluctantly over to the balances, each agate edge as keen and precise in the job it had to do, as we, or most of us anyway, were reluctant and uncertain. There we took some shaky steps along the rigorous pathways of science, standing side by side, a chain of future physicists, fumbling with the weights and balances in hope of making the correct moves, looking covertly sideways to see if those who flanked us were acting more knowledgeably, offering and receiving further instructions made in undertones from the corner of the mouth.

Clarence Baldock had equally rigorous methods of maintaining discipline in his classes. Atonement for those who had gone astray, either by talking when he was talking or by not attending when attention was mandatory or, worse still, by distraction arising from deliberate misuse of equipment or the introduction of some irrelevant object (any one of many that 12 year old boys happen to carry around in their pockets, such as a pet earthworm or a pair of handcuffs) could require a biblical reference – both punishment for the offence and as sanction against future trespass.

Having identified the culprit, Clarence then directed him to leave the class, go back to his form room and fetch a copy of the bible from his desk At this point we knew the offence to be serious and the consequences to be extended, for we all sat in silence, waiting for the unfortunate classmate to reappear with bible, which could take several minutes. The

trek along the corridor, down two flights of stairs, around the quad to one's own form room gave adequate time for reflection on what was to come. Then to knock on the classroom door, make the obligatory apologies to those in session and to ask permission to collect one's bible might give rise an irritable response from the master in charge and an undercurrent of mirth from the class who knew exactly was in progress, having seen it all before.

If all this had taken too long the impatient Clarence Baldock might have resumed his instruction. In any case, the return of he-who-hath-sinned was the signal for the denouement of this episode. The boy was instructed to find the book of Psalms; then psalm 119; then again to read verse 99 loud and clear to the rest of us:

'I have more understanding than all my teachers".

Thus the point was made in his unique but heavy-handed manner that Clarence himself was to be the only point of reference and only he was accorded the right to speak in the classroom. However the ritual itself was testimony enough to leave it printed on our minds as too high a price to pay. I never heard of any serious disorder in Clarence's class.

His alternative and more immediate punishment which we, perhaps wrongly, judged as more serious, required the offending boy to hold out his hand not for the cane but for a swipe from a piece of rubber tubing, which was otherwise used to connect a bunsen burner to the gas taps spaced along each of the wide benches that occupied the lab. It was the original double whammy! Rumour had it, probably emanating from those who spoke from hard experience, that Clarence judged the application of this adapted weapon so that while part of one end hit you on the palm the remainder carried on swinging, as it were, to curl round and swipe you on the back of the same hand just microseconds later.

Clarence was an institution. He played the piano in the School hall every morning whilst we were trooping in to this daily gathering which witnessed the school as a unity. A unity, that is, excepting religious dissenters, and others whose parents who either were or could be persuaded to provide evidence that such spiritual ministrations or worse, indoctrinations, were not in the best interests of their vulnerable offspring.

In those days the outsiders were almost exclusively Roman Catholics and they wore an air of superiority in their status as non-conformists, more, I believe, because they were, for the best part of half an hour, free from scholarly demands, to idle, joke with each other and generally to bask in the original sunshine of the Church of Rome. I suspect that this minor fraternity also had a shadier side. Since the whole school was concentrated in its devotion for a predictable period of time there was an opportunity to pry into the satchels and desks of the classroom absentees. Things might go missing; a sandwich miraculously escaped its greaseproof wrapping paper. Once, a bag of Smith's Crisps (the only brand available at that time, would you believe) mysteriously lost its little blue twist of a bag of salt. Articles of winter clothing acquired the amazing capacity to fly from one coat hanger to another territory occupied by a foreign class of boys. This would all be in the category of a prank rather than outright theft which, of course, was something a grammar school boy would be entirely incapable of.

Anyway, as I say, Clarence's daily performance was unfailing both in its regularity and variability. In fact it never varied at least in all the years I attended the School. The gathering of ten or a dozen classes took long enough for Clarence to play the whole of 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' at least twice through. For me it was an unremitting and eventually numbing introduction to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach although I doubt if I had even heard of Johann Sebastian Bach for most of my attendance at BGS. I believe he (Clarence, that is, not JSB) played an alternative piece on

some joyously unpredictable occasions. Strangely I can now no longer remember what that was. However, being nowadays marginally better informed I venture to suggest it might have been part of Bach's Requiem or Pachelbel's Canon and if it had been announced as the latter I guess I would still have been unable to name the composer.

Clarence Baldock also ran the 1st XI Cricket team of which I was a member for a season and a half. Not many of my team-mates could claim to have played for just half a season, nor would they have wanted to. For that matter, neither did I, but for particular circumstances and an ill-judged decision from the more bolshy part of my engagement with authority. Actually I had to face a clash of interests between cricket and rowing. I belonged to Bexhill Rowing club and was selected to row at one of the coastal regattas in a four which had been together for a year or more. I chose not to let them down rather than take my place as a change bowler and a tail-end batsman for the School First Eleven. It was to be the end of my cricketing career at school. I informed the team captain, a worthy and well-liked member of the Upper Sixth, a year above me. He made no fuss about it. His facial expression suggested it was not a good idea, but there were no lectures, warnings or reprimands; no indication of the consequences of my decision. Neither did Clarence Baldock have words with me, nor was any displeasure communicated in a distinguishably overt way. In fact nothing more was said by anybody either then or later. I was simply never included in the team again; services no longer required; I paid the price. I was dropped: sent to a kind of cricketing Coventry, if you like. Was this partly a reflection of my relatively modest bowling talent and even more modest skill as a batsman? I wondered if one of the more outstanding members of the team had made the same decision in similar circumstances he would have suffered the same fate? Who knows? One doesn't talk about these things, does one?

Back row: Clarence Baldock, myself, Gerry Boon, Peter Marshall, Keith Cronchey, Maurice Elgar, Ian Wines, Colin Cottam. Front row: Roy Pankhurst, Norman Catt, Mark Turner, Peter Ashenden, D G Reynolds.

R H. D'Elboux

'Deli' was our form master for the first year in school. If being a form master was meant to include some kind of pastoral care then I never saw it happen, either from him or any other of his colleagues. Their duties included calling a morning register and writing in the school magazine about our progress; more significantly for all concerned in collating and publishing exam results which was, for most public purposes, what we were there for. We had to become scholars, learning new languages, understanding new ways of thinking, putting our presumed ignorance into some kind of perspective in time and space. This we did, were seen to do and measured in doing. We knew the score and if we

didn't someone would soon tell us. So regular tests, exercises completed independently at home, checked by the subject teacher as well as yearly written exams were taken seriously on both sides of the learning teaching divide. Deli had these jobs to carry out as well as to teach us English.

He seemed to do it all with a certain nonchalance if not an actual abstraction. Nothing appeared to be either urgent or of great importance. Whilst he was both friendly and to some extent sympathetic he never actually manifested enthusiasm for us. He might have been a refined academic finding it beneath his dignity to reveal the wonders of English literature to a bunch of gauche twelve year olds. He smoked cigarettes. If they matched his name they would have Gauloises or Gitanes. His style of smoking was Eastern European, the cigarette brandished in a slightly effete way with thumb and forefinger making an outward play rather than the less conspicuous and more convenient lodge between the first fingers. He could only be seen smoking in the vicinity of the staff room, of course, though it was obvious, both from his tobacco-laden breath and his nicotine-stained fingers that it was his habit. I can imagine his more urgent return to the staff room at break time, extracting a silver cigarette case from the pocket of his tweed jacket and breathing a sigh of relief as he exhaled that first deep and reassuring draught which put a temporary but comfortable distance between him and us, his immutable pupils.

A Midsummer Night's Dream was our introduction to Shakespeare. Today, this is one of my favourite plays. Then, both the subject matter and the language were well outside my cultural compass. I read the Daily Mirror, (which my dad had delivered to the house, daily). I read the weekly Wizard and Hotspur comics; I devoured adventure stories such as Ballantyne's Coral Island or Richmal Crompton's books about the rebellious William Brown. Going to 'the pictures' was a weekly or even twice-weekly treat, whether the films were from the various London studios or from Hollywood (I was in

love with Hedy Lamarr at the time). Then, steam radio's Dick Barton, Special Agent, broadcast on the Light Programme at 6.45 pm. was essential nightly listening and I joined another twenty million who tuned in at that hour. Unsurprisingly these offerings from the mass media more or less exhausted my aesthetic sensibilities and the attractions of Shakespeare were few in comparison to the readily gratifying stories to hand in a working class household like mine. I guess that few of my classmates had had close encounters of any kind with Shakespeare, either.

Notwithstanding our total lack of aptitude we laboured through the trials of Hermia and Lysander in their love for each other, the ridiculous midsummer night's fairy story and the boorish efforts made by 'the mechanicals' to put on a play for a posh wedding.

It was all too much. Deli tried a tad less off-handedly than usual to persuade us of the humour of Bottom the Weaver's insistence on playing every part. Neither could we see the funny side of his offer to roar like a lion moderated to 'roar me as gently as any sucking dove' when it was pointed out that a hearty roar would get them all into trouble by frightening the ladies present. Further on, it seemed plain daft that the Bottom should want to represent a hole in the wall with his fingers so that the two lovers, Pyramus and Thisby could whisper through it. We just didn't get it!

Nevertheless it was an induction of sorts. It flagged up what was to be expected of us in the years ahead, strangely, that was not what we encountered with our next English teacher, Mr Hopkins.

Mr Hopkins.

There were few heroes among our all-male staff. One that undoubtedly qualified for that kind of acclaim, at least as far as rumour and legend would have it, was Mr. Hopkins,

otherwise known as 'Hoppy'. He might have been called that simply as a matey form of his surname, as others of our fraternity, teachers or pupils, sometimes were; labelled – a mark of familiarity or favour and in the absence of anything more apt or inventive. I might have been called 'Pratty' myself in those innocent days before 'pratt' became commonly associated with 'unfortunate' or 'stupid'. Or he might also have been called Hoppy because he walked quite badly; dipping down on one side as though that leg was shorter or injured.

His supporters, and there were many, said that his disability was caused by a battle wound in the war, which, in 1944, was still in progress, although moving to its conclusion the following year. This was possible and somehow fitted the man as we knew him although he never spoke of it, at least to us, his pupils. He was not one to tell of himself, much less to boast, even implicitly, of what he could or wouldn't do, though much of his style and movement implied purpose and determination. He was a tall man, bulky, big-framed. When he entered the class room his presence was immediately felt. He saw and heard each and every one of us. In turn, we knew he knew.

Hoppy was no great dresser; casual for those days, in a tweed jacket and grey flannel trousers. He might also wear a cardigan under his jacket, even that partly hiding a shirt and college tie. He was a comfortable person, a great bear of a man there to do business and see that it was done; definitely not one to tangle with, either physically or intellectually. Not that Hoppy was an academic as far as we in the lower forms knew him. He taught us English which meant learning the structure of the language, syntax and spelling. Thus we were required to analyse sentences, identify main and subordinate clauses of various types; or to parse a sentence classifying each word in terms of its function in the sentence. This seemed to some an unnecessary or at least over-elaborate procedure, not always easy to understand in its furthest reaches, though I

assume it gave us and me in particular, as one who was beginning to think of myself as a writer, a certain amount of belief that I was on the right lines and could use the vehicle to advantage. Also, there was the acceptance that what we were required to do was, by the fact that it was on the timetable, part of the learning fabric of the Grammar School, unquestionably important in itself.

Hoppy was patient with our lack of understanding and with him I came to grips with the tricks of this analysis; there were rules but they seem to be only loosely followed; and there was always some instance just round the corner waiting to trip you up. We were set essays to write, expected to express ourselves accurately and grammatically on the page, not to say with some creativity and imagination. On one occasion our form was set the task of writing the story of a bank note to be told in the first person. Of course, the possibilities were endless in many and much varied ownerships, some lasting only seconds, others, years. The conclusion to my tale, probably to avoid the danger of its otherwise never ending, or certainly to bring it to a rapid and irreversible halt was that I was accidentally thrown on the fire along with other unimportant papers (recycling unheard of in those days). Hoppy's carefully inscribed comment, in red ink at the foot of the page was that I could hardly have told the story of my life if I had perished in the fire! A stolid and unimaginative response, I thought, but typical of the logical and reliable character that he was.

In my book, however, there was still one good reason for describing him as a hero. For some of the timetabled sessions he dealt in heroes and heroic stories. He actually spent the 45 minutes reading to us. Now you may think it hardly necessary to read to eleven or twelve year old boys, grammar school boys at that who had already demonstrated their literacy by passing the 'eleven-plus' entrance examination and identifying themselves academically as within the top 20% of students in the catchment area. Surely such scholars could and should read for themselves?

For myself, I had read, indeed owned, almost all of Richmal Crompton's books about the escapades of the incorrigible William Brown, since made into a TV series and thus labelled 'Just William'. Otherwise, as I have said, my literary excursions were limited to the popular and readily available.

But Hoppy had second-guessed me in my reading choices. He predicted I (and others like me) had not read Jack London's novels, Whitefang and Call of the Wild. He also read The Wind in the Willows, by Kenneth Grahame: what a treat that was! Then, Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island. Even if some of us had read any of these previously Hoppy brought them to life with a presence and a sense of the dramatic that had us spellbound for minutes on end. He introduced us to the vanities of Mr Toad; took us away to another world, the savagery of the frozen North or life aboard the Hispaniola with its mutinous crew; to the danger of being hunted by a starving pack of wolves or the terror of Jim Hawkins in the apple barrel overhearing the treachery of Long John Silver. We were there, right alongside him.

Mr Ruffhead

From the very first, Mr Ruffhead was my French teacher. For his angular nose, lean frame and rapid speech he needed only a beret and a bicycle to become your stereotypical Parisian commuter, jabbering away with that volubility that only the French seem to have.

However the likeness pretty well ended there, somewhat paradoxically, because Scruffy's French accent left something to be desired. He was fluent but imperfect, not a good model for the beginner. Nevertheless, he had us attempting some of the phonemes in the phonetic alphabet where these were required for French pronunciation. These isolated sounds were not easily learned, even less to be transferred to the language proper and I fear our spoken French seldom rose above the painfully deliberate, never reaching an easy conversational mode. Five years later I

made sure my French oral exam was taken in tandem with one of my mates who was at the time appreciably more competent than me, allowing my hesitant contributions to be overtaken by him or the examiner's next question.

Scruffy had few redeeming features, either. He was intense, often narrowly focussed and generally without humour. He did not develop much of a positive relationship with us; I don't think he knew many of us by name or could have identified our strengths and weaknesses even in our learning French, except from his record of written work. While I am sure he meant well – he was a church-going Christian – he had little of the charisma that some of his colleagues revealed in their teaching.

His appearance was slightly impaired by two protruding and partly splayed front teeth which meant that when he was in full flow in any language, in forming a plosive or a sibilant, a certain amount of saliva would be expressed a foot or so in front of his face and, of course, downwards onto someone who happened to be sitting directly, so to speak, in his line of fire. One such person was my friend Ian Wines whose desk was on the front row and immediately in front of mine. He must have been on the receiving end of Scruffy's watery expressions once too often before deciding to take a stand or at least a sit, against it. On this occasion he signalled his vulnerability to Scruffy's expressions by wearing his raincoat. Game on! We prepared for a new and possibly venomous outburst of which we knew Mr Ruffhead BA (Hons) was well capable. It never came. He either didn't or wouldn't notice. The denouement of this well-prepared drama was never acted out. Ian still had his celebrity moments as news of his impertinence spread around the school.

Scruffy was interested in table tennis. He managed to obtain a table which was set up in the gym. With his support a team was formed and a number of us joined the practice sessions one or two afternoons per week. I had already

played the game as a serious sport at the Church Army Social Club and was keen to compete against other schools. It was decided that we entered a schools knock-out competition, sponsored by a weekly newspaper, The Sporting Record. In the first round we were drawn against Sittingbourne Grammar School in Kent. I expected to be included in the team, but obviously Scruffy's judgment was impaired because the team he selected excluded me in favour of one of my mates whom I reckoned I could beat nine times out of ten. Sporting life can be hard!

Ball games were not Scruffy's strongpoint. Neither was he always alert to the obvious sexual puns arising from playground games, an awareness which cost him dearly on one occasion. One of the form room windows had been broken by a well-struck but badly misdirected kick in the melee that was breaktime football on the tarmac area bordered on three sides by classrooms, corridor and gymnasium. Scruffy was on playground duty on the day after this incident and therefore required to read the riot act to all the classes now standing in orderly lines at the command of a whistle which had brought all the noisy exuberance of that brief freedom to a halt. He came straight to the point: "Boys must stop playing with their balls in this area" There was a slight hesitation in which moment the assembly must have weighed the penalty for expressing its feelings against the complete pleasure of letting them go. This moment of decision largely reflected the status of the teacher himself. Sadly Mr Ruffhead was somewhat short of the mark and our reaction then followed; the whole school rocked with laughter, uncontrolled merriment, release from the disciplined order and the day's ritual. Scruffy's response was even more unfortunate. "Oh, so that's your attitude is it? This place is nothing but a low, filthy den of vice!" Trust me, those were his exact words! And there we were, trapped in a mini-epic, shamed in recognition of his embarrassment and our part in that. I wonder what he said to his colleagues, back in the staff-room.

'Wispy' Waring

It is, I suppose, inevitable that schoolboys invent nick-names for almost every teacher. This was so common at Bexhill Grammar School for Boys (was it so for the girls, too?) that one wonders what the distinctive factor was when a teacher was not thus re-named: mildness?, lack of character or any distinguishing physical feature? Impersonal, dry as dust in presentation?

T. F. Waring would have qualified under several of the above heads not to be accorded a nick-name. Yet it is in the perversity of schoolboys that he was labelled by the very lack of thunder in his voice; that he never seemed to raise the volume or heighten the pitch. For this reason he was, I understood, first known as 'Whispers' and later as 'Wispy' Waring, alliteration, no doubt, adding a little spice to the title!

Yet 'Wispy', far from lacking character, made his physically slight presence, his academic authority and clear-sightedness a force not to be under-estimated in the form rooms. His face was gaunt and his black hair parted down the middle slicked to his scalp with hair cream, a popular practice in those days. He taught Latin, a subject I could not and would not grasp much beyond the basic rote learning of 'mensa, mensa, mensam...." It was my first encounter with an inflected language and I was assaulted by the apparent absurdity of it. How had such a language survived with its conjugation of verbs by person and number when in our own, simply superior language, the addition or subtraction of the letter 's' sufficed? Why would anyone want to decline a noun or adjective according to six or seven 'cases' indicating its relationship to other parts of a sentence, when it seemed so logical to keep the word intact and insert a preposition to say precisely what was what? It was all unnecessarily complicated and difficult, or so I thought. But, we were led to believe, the learning of this long dead language was excellent training for our undisciplined minds. My own mind

focussed on sticking it our until the fourth form when it would become an option at which point I would opt out.

Meanwhile we had begun to read and translate Commentarii de Bello Gallico, Julius Caesar's account of his wars in France and beyond. It was a nightmare; for me, not for Caesar who was more successful both in fighting and in writing Latin. 'Wispy' would set us a paragraph to study in preparation for reading and translating out loud during the next lesson. This piece of homework was presumed, according to the rules, to take us about twenty minutes. It usually took me sixty or more, even then unsure of what I had done. Some of this struggle I pictured later:

Homework.

When, of an evening, we
sat in the back room,
each Latin verb checked
for tense and condition,
put in its place on the page
on the table, his newspaper
hissed as he turned the sheet over.

Then, as I read,
line under line
down to ten or fifteen,
all Caesar's's words
completely unheard,
meaning unfeelingly lost.
Through the thick silence he coughed,
came to and sat straight.

Again and again,
as I tried to decide
on the reason of writing,
the writing of reason,
this echoing round,

this troublesome train, was stopped:
through the milk-warm, fire-lit
sunless silence, her scissors
clattered onto wood.

Immediately before the next lesson cribs changed grubby hands, key words offered by reliable fellow authorities were scribbled between lines making for a disordered prelude in the few minutes before Wispy appeared at the door. A few, more competent or 'prep' school boys who had learned Latin before, were fully prepared. The remainder of us stumbled and struggled when and if Wispy's steady gaze or unequivocal finger was cast in our direction.

For all my shortcomings in this classic discipline, I liked the man. I admired his uncluttered way of thinking, his precision in speaking; I even envied his tiny, very precise handwriting to the extent that I tried to use a similar style myself at one stage. Nonetheless my investment in his teaching gradually waned and at the earliest opportunity I confided my intention to let go of him and his subject:

<u>Dropping Latin</u>

Apprenticed to his language, sculptured tongue
I've chased out words from that unyielding stone

in labour not of love but binding pride;
now wait with work, standing at his side.

Surprised, concerned at what I tell him next
He lifts his head, looks above the text.

(no more amo amas amat to jig
no more declining noun or adjective.)

Relief, now I have made an honest stand;
in turn he says I am a foolish man:

Latin, my Oxbridge passport, don't I see;
In fact, there is no other way for me.

I look outside; those fields my alibi
where summer trees balloon into the sky;

see twenties redbrick walls, put up to grace
the thoughts of Euclid, Donne and Locke; betrayed

by terraced house and backyard asphalt patch;
by mum and dad who do not understand,

believe a safe white-collar job will do.
I feel my working class is showing through.

A Cricket Match

Wispy was not of an athletic appearance; he was a measured rather than sprightly mover. He made no mention of ever having played sport, which would still have been entirely in character even if he had represented England at lacrosse or croquet. We knew nothing of his life outside school. So it came as a surprise to find his name listed in the Staff cricket XI to play against the School First XI in the annual fixture toward the end of one summer term.

He didn't score many runs, although he may have been asked to bowl an over against the school batsmen. However, at one point in the game he was fielding at mid-wicket, only twenty yards from where I was sitting on the boundary along with the rest of the school. One of our better batsmen pulled a short ball long and high into the air towards where Wispy was fielding.

While the ball was in flight there was time enough for me to consider the options. Naturally most of us wanted the School XI to win the match. It was us against them, after all. Therefore we hoped (and probably believed) he would drop the catch. It seemed unlikely that his slight somewhat

contained body would have the pace and fluency to get under this high-speed projectile and hold on to it. Then, when he dropped it everybody would cheer, possibly jeer at his feeble effort. At some point in those agonising seconds I turned traitor. I *wanted* him to make the catch; and somehow or other he did; and he did so with the calm and equilibrium that was his trade mark. We might have known better. Such heroic deeds are never forgotten and I still see him taking that catch just as vividly today as I did on that summer afternoon.

The Essay Prize

My last dealings with Wispy Waring were about School Prizes. Over five years I had laboured in the 'A' classes, usually well out of the top two or three places in the end of year exams. I had won no prizes for academic performance. Worse, I had noticed that a boy who was bottom of our class in these same exams found himself mounting the stage at the following year's prize-giving to receive an award for being the best of the B-class pupils. It did occur to me that there were rewards for doing worse rather than better.

However in the Lower Sixth form I was considering journalism as a career and became more confident in writing prose. On this basis I decided to enter the competition for the Senior Essay Prize on the given subject of Robert Louis Stevenson. The only novel of his I had actually read was Treasure Island so I set about reading more of him. Fortunately, I came upon his *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, a personal account of his twelve-day walk with the intractable Modestine, his bed-carrier. This revealed a great deal of Stevenson's history and character and became the basis for my essay, as well as for my increased recognition and respect for him as a man. I imagine the essay must have contained some of this more personal connecting with Stevenson and it may be that this influenced the judge, too because I was awarded the Senior Essay Prize for that year (1950).

The matter was not settled there, however. I knew which book - prizes were always books - I wanted and had already identified it in our local bookshop. It was the then newly published *The Story of Art*, by Ernst Gombrich. The master responsible for securing the prizes was Wispy. For the second time in our joint history, horizons differed. He said this was too expensive to be considered for this award. The book was about eight shillings and sixpence in those pre-decimal days. He declined to say exactly how much could be spent, but when I offered to pay the difference, whatever it was, he was clearly reluctant to agree that either. In the end he grumbled a way to fully fund the purchase and I in turn received that handsome volume on Speech Day. Of course, the book has since become a best seller and has been translated into many other languages. My original much used copy sits on the bookshelf these sixty-odd years later still carrying the School Prize label on the inside cover, inscribed with my name in Wispy's tiny rounded script.

Mathematicians in the Making

I had two good maths teachers in my time at Turkey Road. At least one of them was a good teacher; the other was at least a good mathematician. The former was my guide and inspiration in a subject where I had modest ability, but enough constructive thinking to enjoy some success in what many regarded as a difficult, even frightening subject. The fact that a majority struggled to understand drove me on. It meant that I could and should be better than them. This competitive streak kept me going in a slow but steady struggle to succeed as a mathematician.

In the early years my mentor - he seemed as much a friend as a teacher - was T. L. Davies. a patient , softly spoken Welshman whose delivery and explanations were slow and deliberate, apparently well aware of our level of

understanding and the pace at which we could assimilate new ideas, for he would pause to read our attentive faces for evidence of doubt or assurance. He made it possible for us to ask fundamental questions without feeling foolish. It may have been he who told us that simple questions are often the most difficult to answer, perhaps because they deal with fundamental issues and it these that are not always properly understood in mathematics.

T. L. Davies owned and rode a motor-cycle called a Velocette. This was a radical 'Little Engine' design with a water cooled, rubber-mounted petrol motor that provided for unusually quiet running. The bike also had leg guards and running boards which gave it something of a 'scooter' appearance in today's terminology. Altogether it was an untypical although sensible machine offering nothing of the noisy cut and thrust or the raw energy of the Triumph 500cc, the Nortons and bigger BSA's of the time. It was not a proper motor-bike, we decided. it was for the 'pansy boys', we said with our prejudice based, as prejudices often are, on ignorance, in this case ignorance of the practicalities of such a vehicle for the thoughtful well-organised person that was TLD!

The other maths teacher was Mr H. J. Cook who succeeded in persuading us of the importance as well as the problematic nature of his subject without apparently realising that for much of the time we didn't grasp the particular assumptions or sequential deductions he was talking about. He carried an esoteric air in his teaching; any moment now he would be about to reveal all, so that the magic of the process would be unveiled as a conjuror might, exceptionally, let you in on his trick. Unfortunately Cookie rarely did. I think he was in love with mathematics, guarded his secrets jealously, keeping them just out of our reach.

However in one respect he showed surprising insight into our future needs. He insisted that we learn how to convert the then current monetary system of pounds, shillings and

pence into decimals of one pound and vice versa. It seemed to be one of his pet subjects and he took as much pride in his prediction that we would one day reap the benefit as in the arithmetic itself. I guess most of us were sufficiently impressed to get the idea and the method, although it didn't appear in our exams or test papers and in the comfort of the only coinage we had ever known it didn't seem likely that things were going to change much, at least as far as we could see. But he was right, of course, twenty-three years ahead of the decimalisation of British currency in 1971.

Mr H J Cook did have one or two fascinating eccentricities,. Sometimes he seemed absurd, even ridiculous. It was as though he could only relate to us by performing; by being a showman rather than an educator. A propos of nothing in the classroom or the mathematical matters in hand he would occasionally demonstrate a high straight-legged kick, like one of the Tiller girls,. In this he revealed an unusual flexibility for a paunchy middle-aged man. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry; it was faintly embarrassing. It was as though he wished to impress us, young and fit as we were, that at least in this one limited accomplishment, he was better than we were. He was right but who cared?

Once, on the occasion of a Sixth Form Dance in the gymnasium, which had no formal entertainment on the programme as far as we knew, Mr Cook appeared, mid-evening unheralded, just inside the doorway (maybe he was prepared for a quick getaway) without an introduction and sang a couple of old songs, like 'Come Into The Garden Maud,' in a resonant but greatly overdone vibrato tenor. We were shocked, silent; I probably forgot to applaud. It was totally alien to the event: wrong place, wrong time, wrong person! How on earth did *he* get there?

Even his daily arrival at school on an ancient 'sit-up-and-beg bicycle owed something to Jacqes Tati's Monsieur Hulot. He rode with equanimity, a near vertical position on the saddle and an unhurried steady application of leg to pedal that

denied any impression of muscular effort or skilful balancing. He might have been on a moving staircase or some circular ride at a fair for all the involvement he showed in actually powering the bicycle. Now he comes! There he goes! Who was he, our Mr Cook?

Doug Tuffin

Doug appeared later on in my passage through the school to take charge of physical education or 'gym' as it was known then. He was the youngest member of staff, and had trained at Loughborough College, a noted centre for the training of P.E. teachers. In fact, he had completed the course to qualify as a handicraft teacher. By the time we were in the sixth form he became one of us and confided this information with the instruction not to spread it around. He meant among the other boys, I presume, because it must have been known to the appointing body.

Doug was a fine man, quietly confident always unassuming. He was professional in his approach to teaching, recognising it as a learning rather than as simply an instructional process. Most of his colleagues were graduates who had done no specific training for teaching and in one or two cases their classroom practice was dire. Doug was an excellent gym teacher and a great improvement on the various part-timers who instructed us in the old-fashioned and boring Swedish drill. At the heart of all this was Doug's interest in sport. He was an excellent gymnast himself and played badminton locally. By the time I had returned to the town as a P.E. Teacher at the Down School he had introduced basketball and we met for a second time as teaching colleagues.

In the Lower Sixth, I had little idea of what career I might pursue myself, but my school mate, Roy Pankhurst, was already aiming for Loughborough to train as a P.E. teacher. Although Roy was excellent at most other sports, gymnastics was not his forte. But he was also a determined young man

and he asked Doug to give him extra coaching in gymnastics – learning basic vaults and so on. I was lucky enough to be invited along for the ride although I had no idea at that point that I, too, would find myself at Loughborough with him and later as a teacher of physical education.

Wilf Lamb and R.E. Yorke

Bexhill Grammar School for Boys was essentially managed by two men. One was the Deputy Headmaster a gentleman called Mr R. E. Yorke, otherwise known as 'Snoop', the other a certain Mr Wilfred Lamb. I have introduced them thus, because, as I saw it, the first did most of the running of the school, the day to day organisation and administration, while the second was more of a figurehead – lofty, remote and on show when he was required to be: morning assembly, other occasional meetings of the whole school and, of course on Speech Day. In seven years at Turkey Road I can't remember any single occasion when he spoke to me or I to him about anything of significance. I doubt he knew who I was or what contribution I had made to the life of the School, even when I became one of only a dozen or so sixth formers (the great majority of boys left school at the age of 16 having completed their School Certificate) or a vice-prefect. Moreover the Upper Sixth form room was immediately adjacent to his office with only a door intervening – a door that rarely opened.
We knew three things about him. First that he was a musician and selected boys to sing in the School Choir. These were favoured pupils who gained status and privilege from his support, if not a more direct route to Oxford or Cambridge through some kind of musical back door. But, listen to me! These are still the meanderings of an immature teenager who didn't know the half of it – or did I?

Second, he was very keen on chess and his select few represented the School against other schools in chess matches. Similar feelings apply, although I did play chess,

quite poorly, I imagine and managed to play for my House, Arundel, on one occasion, when, since I can't remember the outcome of this single representative honour, I suspect I must have lost.

Third, his brother was the cartoonist Bertram Lamb who drew the
Daily Mirror's Pip, Squeak and Wilfred strip. Although Wilfred, the baby of an orphaned family of animals, was a rabbit he was named after our headmaster, presumably at a time when he also was innocent and toothless. But, I have to say, he was an affable gentleman, quite bland and fairly harmless in my very limited experience of his presence.

So, what with choir, chess and this generally absent style of leadership it was left to his number two to create a presence in the corridors and classrooms of the school; which is exactly what he did.

'Snoop'

Snoop was not a popular figure either. His nickname represented his regular and persistent pursuit of public offenders of any variety or degree. Procedural rules were his specialty. Running in corridors or loitering: cutting across the quad – a forbidden mainly grassy space and only ever occupied when a photographer came to fix the whole body of us permanently on plate and paper – instead of treading the three sides of the rectangle around, were obvious transgressions. If one was caught out of class, there had to be a good reason for walking the passageways while everybody else was diligent and orderly in their classrooms. Smoking in the toilets, of course was a serious offence as was being late for a lesson or absent when registered otherwise. Did people skip lessons? Where did they hide if so? Who dared to cover for them when an over-zealous teacher noticed the vacant desk? So much for the underground that I never penetrated.

Snoop was a creature of order and habit – a susceptible combination when a teacher such as he knew little or nothing of us as individuals. The nearest he came to naming any one of us was 'Boy!' or 'You, Boy!' So he had no clue as to who among us was impertinent or daring enough to upset his routine as, to my amazement, two of our number decided to do, before his geography lesson, one afternoon.

His large cloth-bound maps were kept in a locked cupboard in his classroom. He would retrieve the appropriate map, carry it in front of us to a rail with sliding hooks on which, when suitably spaced, he could hang the corners of his chosen map. Now the rail itself was hung higher up the wall by an attached cord exactly as one would hang a picture.

Being unable to reach these two sliding hooks with his hand, he was in the habit of extending his reach with the as yet unfolded map, using one corner to nudge each hook to the necessary width before unfolding the map and deftly lifting it onto the hooks ready for the lesson ahead. He had performed this ritual dozens, if not hundreds of times in front of us and we knew every inch of that map's pathway from cupboard to wall. And it was inches that 'Nellie' Wallace and his accomplice decided would make the difference.

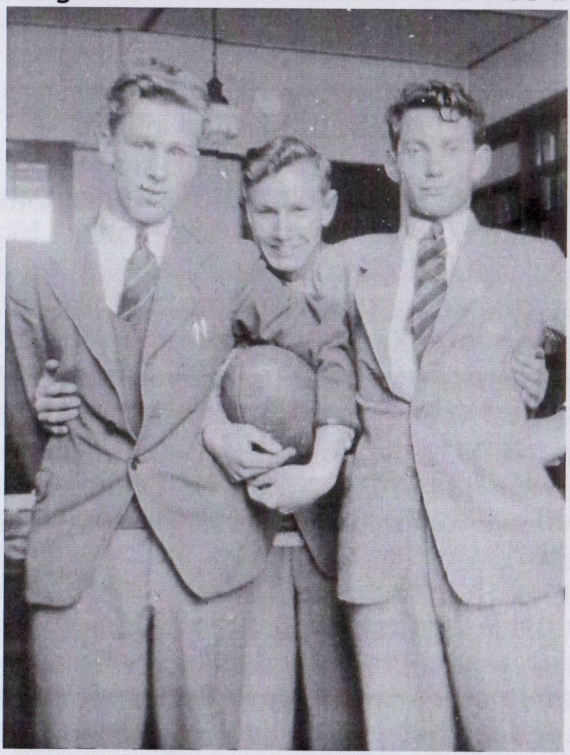
Before Snoop appeared they took down the hanging frame, tied a knot in the cord, so shortening it to hang five or six inches higher, retired to their desks and waited. A few minute later Snoop bustled in, gown flowing behind him. We watched his entry and predicted routine with a new interest. At the point where he reached for the sliding hooks with a corner of the still folded map, he found to his surprise that he couldn't make contact. For a few seconds he seemed non-plussed by this failure. It was almost as if he suddenly realised he had grown shorter the night before ; that it was one of those setbacks that are part of the human condition and have to be taken in one's stride. At any rate nothing he said or did implied that he had even noticed the map

hanger's newly elevated position much less to suspect that one of us had interfered with it or that he had been tricked. On the contrary, his usual unsmiling face was unchanged in its usual unswerving intent. His onward focus was the business in hand; something wrong, perhaps, but he didn't know or care what it was; didn't notice that we were unusually interested in his demeanour or on the edge of an outburst of laughter. In a John Cleese's Basil-like style he noticed nothing except his immediate problem. Then in an equally Basil-like manner he 'fetch chair, stand on chair, hang map, carry on teaching Form V.' I suppose I might say our prank backfired – I was only too keen to claim part of the action when the danger of crime discovered and punishment administered was well past. The truth was it never fired at all, and all involved were left frustrated if, at the same time, unscathed. Perhaps he won that one anyway, despite himself!

On a later occasion, now in the sixth form and following a timetable graced with sessions for independent study, I had a much closer encounter with Mr R. E. Yorke, this time of the seriously unpleasant kind, though no doubt hilariously funny to any witness who happened on the scene.

Not all of us in the Lower Sixth were disciplined enough to use our 'free' time for academic work, although it would be a habit we needed to develop for the future. In fact the Sixth Form Common Room was often noisy enough to drive those who wanted to read or write out of the room altogether. Various antics, tricks and diversions from study occurred with some regularity. One such involved myself and two fellow students holding the entrance door against a couple of other sixth former colleagues who were trying to get in from the corridor side. Don't ask me why or how such a situation could develop among otherwise responsible and presumably intelligent sixteen or seventeen year olds. Probably we were stupid and irresponsible despite our senior status in school. At any rate the struggle was at its height when first one, then the other of our resistance group fell away, leaving me

to defend alone. They had seen something I couldn't see through a two-inch hole in the door upright, perhaps cut for a lock that was never fitted. It was Snoop, himself having encountered the two boys on the corridor side, ordered them to stop, at the same time choosing to investigate the interior resistance. It was him against me, still unaware that the opposition had changed. Eventually his superior weight began to tell and I gave way as he burst unceremoniously into the room somewhat distressed from his exertions. By now, of course, the other two had assumed positions of intensive study leaving me wholly accountable. He was consumed with anger, accused me of behaving like a second-former (which was true) and threatening me with a spell of standing in the middle of the quadrangle for all to identify as a criminal. His booming voice echoed down the corridor, leaving no one in doubt as to who was in the dock.



Roy Pankhurst, Maurice Elgar and myself in the VIth Form Common Room

The Sixth Form.

My grammar years ended inconspicuously, that is, with a whimper rather than a bang. I had persuaded my parents that it was important to stay at school and enter the sixth form in order to take the higher exams, the equivalent, these days, to 'A' levels. I think I had persuaded them that it would lead to a better career. In fact, that side of it wasn't clear to me either! My more important reason was to engage in school sport, to play for school teams whenever possible. In the meantime I chose a mixture of subjects for further study that could not be fully timetabled for me because of an overlap between them. At that time maths was taken as a science and one was not expected to mix 'arts' and sciences. I chose English Literature, French and Maths. It was the beginning, as I say, of a downhill path, of dwindling conviction that I could, literally, or logically stay the course. I had to miss both French and English lessons each week and I was no great scholar in the first place.

It occurred to me at some point in the Upper Sixth Form that I probably wasn't going to pass any of the higher exams. Therefore, I chose another option, the open examination for entry as an officer in the Customs and Excise Service. It seemed like an escape, a sensible way out of my having spent almost two years in the Sixth form for no profitable achievement.

The exam was approximately of a higher school certificate standard and it was also a competition. Fourteen hundred or so of us, nation-wide, competed for about four hundred places. I may have crept in somewhere under the one thousandth place and was well out of consideration for a job. I tried similar exams for entry to the Civil Service, Executive Grade Officer, got an interview with a row of knowledgeable people in London, but still no job. In desperation I took the Clerical Officer Grade exams, which were only of school certificate standard, something that was almost two years

behind me, and was immediately offered a post at the Royal Army Service Corps and Army Catering Corps Records Office at Ore Place on The Ridge at the back of Hastings. I took it and started work a week or two before the Higher School Certificate exams were held at Bexhill Grammar School for Boys..

It was an ignominious and shameful exit, I felt, and I spent the next twenty years in part time study to achieve what, with more support and encouragement, from a largely indifferent school system, I should have achieved by the age of twenty-one. Yes, I do blame the school for its lack of any pastoral role or career guidance in cases like mine where my parents had little understanding of what I could do or what academic pathways were available to pursue, other than Oxford or Cambridge Universities which seemed to be the only targets that mattered.

Mark Holmstrom

There were at least two memorable experiences from my sixth form days. One was that of winning the Senior Essay Prize. The other was of meeting Mark Holmstrom who appeared from nowhere to join us in the Sixth Form common room in late 1949. His father worked for UNESCO and his family had recently moved to Paris while Mark, himself, was sent here to England to join us at BGS. He was brilliant linguist and a fervent socialist, bubbling over with energy and enthusiasm for any sort of lively event, short of which he was more than capable of creating for himself. We became friends and he tried to persuade me to be more of an activist in the socialist movement. Leafleting and doorstepping were not for me at that point, however and I kept him at a safe distance.

Mark invited me to join his family in Ville d'Avray, a suburb of Paris, over the New Year holiday of 1949-50. I was able to accept his offer by withdrawing almost all of the money in my Post Office Savings Account, in effect my life savings which included all those half crowns and two-shilling postal orders family friends, uncles and aunts had sent since I was born. Of course it was not a popular decision with my parents, but it was a unique opportunity at a time when very few people could afford to leave England for a holiday and even if they did, it was more likely that they travelled by boat than aeroplane.

So my trip to Paris was via cross-channel ferry from Newhaven. It was a cold morning in late December. I caught the Brighton train from Bexhill-on-Sea, changed at Lewes and made the short run, tracking the Sussex Ouse almost to the sea, down to this inauspicious little port, hardly woken to the post war re-building that was occupying its larger neighbours. I carried a battered cardboardy case from train to boat and was relieved to make it on time, to settle down to the five hour crossing; to feel the excitement of a first ever venture abroad.

At Dieppe, I found the Paris train which made the two-hour trip to Gare St-Lazare. Mark, already at home in Villed'Avray, took the bus up to meet me. The return to his house was my first impression of the most glamorous European city of the day. Yet the bus windows seemed only to reveal suburban dwellings. We crossed the Seine at Pont de Sevres and were soon in Ville d'Avray.

Mark's family had rented a house that was once inhabited by the landscape artist, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot. Although he painted before the Impressionists (he died in1875) the fact of his having being there prompted me to produce a tinted sketch of the large cone-topped summer-house and the trees behind it at the bottom of their garden.

Mark's family was welcoming and we dined well except for the table wine which was awful. We went out that same evening to a local bar where every kind of spirit was on offer. Lacking any guidance on what or why, I chose the bottle nearest me on the top shelf. It turned out to be Cinzano or 'sanzanno' as the barman pronounced it. I loved its mixture of sweet and bitter and have enjoyed it ever since.

During the following days, with Mark's better knowledge of both French and Paris, we became acquainted with the City; first, to the Mayol Theatre, maybe a little sister of the Folies Bergere, but no less outrageous in the 50's, with its advertised 'cinquantes nues" It was here that I learned an important lesson, unavailable in prudish England, or otherwise to me in my virgin youth: that a woman undressing or slightly clothed is more erotically stimulating than one entirely naked!

We visited art galleries, though not the Louvre. At that time I was interested mainly in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting. But I found painting and sculpture in the Musee d'Art Moderne was fascinating; opened my eyes to all kinds of new possibilities. We went to Montmartre, to the Sacre Coeur, to the Notre Dame; we strolled along the Left Bank of the Seine, I think it was a Sunday, and saw the bouquinistes with their many volumes in poor quality yellowish paper - I didn't doubt, in those days as a fascinated francophile, that the message was more important than the medium.

Food rationing continued in England in 1951 and on January 12th I recrossed the Channel with a parcel of veal, packets of sugar and other foods in my suitcase. I am to this day unsure of what they were looking for in the bags of an impecunious schoolboy, but the Customs man at Newhaven turned me over: every item out of the case and on his counter, then a dismissive shrug as he turned away from the mess he had made, leaving me to repack everything.

Class Mates

Mark Holmstrom was only one of many good friends and colleagues I met during the grammar years. He was, despite his infectious enthusiasm and worldly knowledge, a johnny-come-lately. I had spent five years in a classroom with thirty other young men some of whom became close friends, team mates or at least highly respected for their academic or artistic abilities.

The fifth year, 1948-49, was the last year at school for most of us. Whereas Forms V and V Modern listed 54 pupils together, in the following year only about 12 of us stayed on into the Lower IV. Thus most of my classmates had started work or gone to another place of further education, as had, for example, my good friend, Michael Bates, to Brighton, to study architecture; another friend and sportsman, Alan Coggle went into banking as did some others from our class. Stan Hooker opted for farming, which, of course offered local opportunities while most of the remainder were obliged to seek employment or higher education farther afield.

My own academic position, as determined by yearly exams in all subjects over the years was usually around high single figures. The regular top brains were Maurice Elgar, Alan Wakefield, Ian Wines, Ian Wallis and Michael Soan. Maurice was also an outstanding sportsman who later captained the 1st XI Cricket team. The most successful sportsman in our class was another good friend of mine, Roy Pankhust. In fact there was a phalanx of games players in the classroom who lined up behind Ian Wines at the front, including Roy, Alan Coggle, Michael Bates, Peter Marshall and myself. I don't know whether this grouping was a statement of common purpose, an assertion, or a defence against those who branded the games players as somehow 'less than' those who achieved in other fields.

Roy Pankhurst was an outstanding athlete who could compete with the best at almost any sport. He represented Sussex as a Young Amateur at cricket, eventually following a career in teaching physical education. He was a modest man who applied himself fully with whatever he undertook. He was a popular prefect and house captain, known to every boy in school. A reflection of all this was in his winning the Mullens Prize, awarded to the best all-rounder, as voted by his fellows, on several occasions. This very special kind of recognition, however, did have a downside. Immediately upon declaring the results of the election, the winner was allowed a couple of minutes getaway before he was chased around or out of the school, until the pack descended on him to 'de-bag' him. Thus the Mullens Prize winner went, in a bizarre and, one suspects, uniquely British way from exaltation to humiliation in a matter of minutes!

PART 2: TOWN

What kind of a town was Bexhill-on-Sea in 1944, my first year at secondary school? Well, the 'Sea' part of it offered nothing of the seaside pleasures that the late Victorians had created, the Edwardians nurtured and, in the thirties, the 9th Earl De La Warr had crowned with the prize-winning Pavilion. Whilst the De La Warr Pavilion continued to offer shows, the beach itself was closed, though, from the promenade or adjacent roads you could view the Channel. Barbed wire fenced off the shingle which we understood was mined. The lower part of the shingle beach and the sands were barricaded against invasion by enemy landing craft. The English Channel was a war zone, more acutely so in 1944 when all the weaponry we had was employed to bring down the V-1's or buzz-bombs before they reached the coast.

I had missed 5 years of sailing, boating and bathing in our little bit of the Channel. Some might argue this was no loss. South Coast waters are rarely clear, often cold and rough with a chilling south-west wind to add another layer of hostility. But for kids like us the water held the fascination of a playground with endless things to do both in and beside it. Later on it was a mecca, a place to meet friends: 'In front of the Clock Tower' or 'by the Colonnade' was enough to locate your mates or, later still, to meet girls. In 1944, though, it was still closed.

Egerton Park Baths

About that time the Egerton Park Baths re-opened and I learned to swim at the late age of 10. For a year or so a 4/6d season ticket was essential to one's social and leisure life. This allowed a boy a) to swim and dive, particularly at the deep end of the pool (the shallow end was for the very young, the hopelessly timid or intolerably incompetent); b) to demonstrate one's athletic feats to others, or to emulate those whose skill and daring exceeded one's own; c) to

impress girls of the right age and attractiveness if they were impressionable; (most were not) and d) to acquire and be somewhat smug about having a sun-tanned body like those men in American films or magazines.

The Baths opened for two sessions in the day; one from eight, or thereabouts in the morning, closing around one-o-clock, while Fred White, the Superintendant, had his lunch, and re-opening at two. On a hot day in the summer holidays the morning session was not usually crowded and quite relaxed. But before two-o-clock in the afternoon, especially in the school holidays, there would be a queue along the outside wall, waiting for Fred to open the door at the top of the stairs. When he did so there was an avalanche of young bodies down the wooden staircase to get or show tickets at the office, immediately followed by a sprint to the cabins where shirt and trouser clad boys were seen to disappear in one second and reappear in their bathing costumes the next. All this was with the intent of being the first to hit the clear and hitherto unruffled water with a mighty splash so declaring one's arrival and precedence with undeniable impact.

Getting and Spending

Then there was the output/return financial calculation to consider. A season ticket, as I say, cost four shillings and sixpence for entry whenever you liked between opening and closing. That is a total of 4x12+6 = 54 pence. A single admission for us was otherwise 4 pence. So, having purchased a season ticket you would need to swim there on at least 14 occasions to break into profit. My money was hard earned doing butchers and paper rounds every week. So I kept a careful check on the number of visits to the baths and took some satisfaction from swimming sessions numbering 15 and higher. Well, my Grandfather's name was Caleb but I bore no other connection with those Hebrew or Scottish stereotypes.

My main income was from a daily paper round which started with the 'seven-at the-latest and preferably earlier than that' injunction from a certain Mr Mitchell at Collington Post Office. This instruction gives a fair indication of the relationship between him and myself: he, the up with the lark, a model of shining efficiency and 'job done' hustle; me, like Shakespeare's schoolboy in this case the whining paper-boy with bag, unwashed morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to Collington Post Office where Mr Mitchell's assistant, the cheerful Ernest Hoffman - 'mister' to me - would have the papers marked up, ordered and ready to lump into my print-blackened canvas paper-carrier bag. The trouble was that I had the best and most important round in the business. I did the four roads closest to the shop. In the one immediately adjacent, Colebrooke, I delivered to almost every house. Many of these householders were men who worked in the City of London and wanted their paper in time to take it with them on the early train to London from the nearby West Station. When I was late they were irate; their complaints to the boss were relayed to me in turn, followed by threats of his dispensing with my services. I did that paper round for more than six years. Despite my dilatory tendencies he never sacked me.

The 'Colebrooke' round was worth five shillings a week. My father insisted that I should contribute some of that to help pay for my clothes. I can't remember actually agreeing to this, neither can I recall feelings of resentment that I was required to give up part of my earnings for what, up to that time, would be seen as a parental liability. Looking back on it now, it seems a harsh imposition and one which might have reduced my incentive to find spare-time employment. It didn't, and I was able to afford a number of pleasures with the remaining money, which my brother Reg was not because he preferred not to find paid work in his spare time and no one blamed him for that!

The Pictures

The most important of the expenses was for weekly entrance to one of the Town's three remaining cinemas, the Playhouse in Western Road, The Ritz in Buckhurst Road and the Carlton, until some time just after the War, in Town Hall Square. The cinema was a crucial influence on our lives. The 'movies' were the only medium that offered newsreel scenes from the war, feature films from studios on both sides of the Atlantic, drama, comedy and documentary in the most accurate facsimile of real life that we, or anybody else, had ever seen. It is nearly impossible to explain in the present age of screened moving images from almost any source - entrance porches or satellites, cameras inside our bodies to David Attenborough's astonishing images of nature's great forces – how breath-takingly unique an experience a visit to the cinema actually was. The latest film from Ealing, Pinewood or Hollywood was eagerly anticipated, always enjoyed and talked about for days and weeks afterwards. We were slaves to the cinemas, addicts to the movie culture which, in some degree we acted out in our daily lives. The film stars held unrivalled precedence. They were, after all, showing us how to live, laugh, sing or dance. I would emulate Fred Astaire as I tried to tap dance on the kitchen linoleum. It never made quite the right sound though, and it was years before I discovered that tap dance shoes had metal plates fixed toe and heel, to the sole.

We learned how to hold a cigarette, how to inhale tobacco; we knew, and mimicked the cowboys or mounted police in their riding skills, though the only horse we ever saw was pulling the coalman's delivery dray. We learned how to speak 'posh' or common, with a Scottish/Irish/Welsh/Cockney accent; like a New Yorker or an American from the deep South. We learned how to kiss, to drive a motor car or fly an aeroplane – or at least we thought we did. We could act 'tough' or 'soppy' recount every Abbott and Costello film ever made and quote the dialogue from the funny bits more or less verbatim.

The stills from some of the film action or the glamorous portraits of their stars were displayed, life size or larger in frames at the entrance to the cinemas. These artful shots of the screen idols were sometimes seductive - usefully separating the star from their involvement with the hero of the story - giving them a degree of apparent availability, a sort of invitation to see more. It was as though these gorgeous women were making their appearance especially for you! Some kind of chemistry operated in me in those early teen days. I fell in love with first with Hedy Lamarr and then with Ingrid Bergman. For some completely illogical reason I did not fall for Rita Hayworth, Ginger Rogers, Lauren Bacall or any of a host of other beautiful women of that era. At that time it was a naive romanticism, a kind of idealism of the innocent. The more sexy sort came later with Jane Russell, Brigette Bardot and Marilyn Monroe who were plainly out to get us. Jane Russell, for example in The Outlaw, went further than most in displaying herself as a sexual temptress and the posters that trailed her appearance at the Playhouse in Western Road shouted that she was 'Mean, Moody and Magnificent', only the last of which could describe her near naked body.

Typically, in that sexist era, and in contrast to the 'glamour girls', the male stars made their names in quite different ways, some as comics, others as tough guys, romantics, adventurers or heroes against all odds. Despite truly wonderful performances by such as Bette Davis (All About Eve) or Ingrid Bergman (Casablanca) women were given mainly romantic roles as lovers and wives. Meanwhile Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, and many historic warriors down the ages emerged from behind those golden brown curtains after we had waited impatiently through the same series of standard tunes like 'It's Only a Paper Moon' and 'Always True to You Darling In My Fashion' that preceded the trailers, shorts or "B" films that in turn preceded the main attraction.

Which raised another sizeable issue we had with the cinema industry at that time, namely the regular loss of a second full length feature film, or 'B' film, as it was known, to a mish-mash of news and shorts which went under the title of 'Full Supporting Programme'. They tried this on whenever the main feature film was a much anticipated smash hit – with a big star or a big story or more often both! Such a barefaced deception (since it was now neither 'full' nor 'supporting', on the contrary, in our view, incomplete and flimsy) was greeted with despairing groans and unbridled anger. We were paying the same good money for only one proper picture; worse we might have to sit through some boring piece about the state of the Empire or a marginally less boring travelogue which always seemed to conclude with same falsely regretful words "and now, as the sun sinks slowly in the west, we must make a last farewell to Honolulu, Kon-tiki or the mud huts of the Boro-woro tribe"; wherever, whatever, whoever – who cared? Not us; consequently, unruly lads that we were, made nuisances of ourselves with loud and boorish comments that disturbed other patrons. Soon, an usherette would appear, identify us as the trouble-makers, shine her torch in our faces with a warning that the manager would throw us out if the interruptions continued. Our protests may or may not have been justified. Either way, I would probably react even more strongly if on the receiving end of such a lack of consideration today. Such is the righteousness of the converted!

And it was, yet again, the cinema that brought us the first images of the Nazi-driven atrocities at the end of the war. When the allied forces first reached the now notorious concentration camps at Dachau, Belson and others, the cameras were right behind them. Gaumont-British and Pathe showed newsreel footage that shocked the world. The emaciated and 'walking dead', hardly capable of movement were caught behind barbed wire fences as they themselves fronted piles of equally stricken bodies. It was our first inkling of what was to be known as the 'Holocaust'. The

sheer horror of seeing what had happened, the disconnection with what we had come to accept as normal in the way our nations were at war with each other, made it seem unreal if not impossible.

Girls

An increasingly important attraction for me during my 'grammar years' was toward women or at least girls of my own age. My schools from St Barnabas Junior onward were disappointingly bereft of the opposite sex. I had no sisters, the older girl who lived next door turned out be a domineering bully, before her family, in turn, was replaced by one with two sons. I didn't meet any girls at school though the girls grammar school occupied the other half of our building and both sexes used the same hall at different times. We were strictly divided. They were inaccessible and mostly unseen except in summer when, by lying down on the grassy playing area at the back of the school close to the dividing hedge one could see them, or at least their legs, as they used the tennis courts during the lunch hour; desperate measures, usually ridiculed by those playing football on the same field.

By the time I was fourteen or fifteen I found that girls could be approached in summer on the beaches, because they were on holiday and on a similar look out. Others had loose connections with us Rowing Club lads and yet others might join in laddish games on the Down or in the Park. But it was altogether casual and rarely romantic! Although my hormones might be racing my relations with girls were on the slow side. Most of my spare time was spent with mates, males, that is, school friends, whether it was to play football, cricket, tennis, whatever. As groups of boys we sometimes met girls in their own groups around town or in the Continental Cafe on the Marina but it never seemed to go any farther than that! I guess we did a lot of fantasising:

Act One

Once I was Adam, the first teenager
caught by the adolescent clock, turned twelve
thrown to the troublesome tunnel of love,
flaunting its wild swings and siren screams

Mostly in the dark, even in daylight
I flew on the edge of a hormone high
womanly curves caught my eye
as they came on around every corner

I improvised nightly with novice actors,
fumbled lines, hands, mistimed entrances
and exits for there were no rehearsals
and nobody had a script.

Stories of my unlicensed libido
would be greatly exaggerated
but I hoped for rave reviews of that first night.

There was one obvious way to get a girl in your arms and that was at a dance. Dances were regularly held on Saturday nights throughout the year and on other festive occasions such as Regatta Evening, Christmas or New Year's Eve. The nearest for me were the Devonshire Hotel and the East Wing of the De La Warr Pavilion. And apart from the odd novelty dance such as the Lambeth Walk or the Palais Glide it was all close up ballroom hold, couple dancing. But how did one learn to dance? What were the steps and rhythms of the Waltz, the Quickstep and the Slow Foxtrot, the main three dances played by a live band at these venues?

The answer lay in two resources. First, the Victor Sylvester book on modern ballroom dancing, complete with printed black feet on the page to show the patterns one had to make on the dance floor; this book was bought along with music by the Victor Sylvester strict tempo dance band on

shellac records. My friend, Michael Bates and myself tried to learn to dance by this method, not wholly successfully, I have to admit. Apart from the complications of reading and stepping the steps simultaneously and well enough to keep in time with the music, neither of us wanted to take the woman's part for very long because, well, we wouldn't, would we?

The second option was to go for lessons. This I did at a School of Dancing at the top end of Manor Road in Bexhill. It was just as difficult, but produced better results. We began the session with the Barn Dance. I soon learned to do a silent clap after the two outward chasse steps so that my clap didn't precede or follow all the others who came in on the beat. Occasionally I was taken on by The Mistress, herself. It was an unnerving experience, as this portion of my poem, Twostep, explains:

My teacher at the Manor Road Academy
made contact fleetingly at the hips,
took me in a firmer hold
with hands and shoulders.
In her arms we moved as one.
I thought I was leading,
felt as though I wasn't –
like she knew my mind
before I had made it up;
invaded my unconscious
mapped all the aerobatics, left me
with a half-belief that I was still the pilot ....

In the end I made it to the East Wing on Saturday nights for the risky privilege of asking a girl to dance with me. By now I could do a passable waltz or quickstep but had to sit out the foxtrot. It was still quite a daunting business usually resulting in an unsatisfactory conclusion to the evening:

Skinny Dipping.

Puffy Windsor knots
stood proud from starched collars:
tickets to a sweaty quickstep
or the tricksy moves of a tango.

But we were still on probation
with girls whose 'let you know' looks
held no promise of close contact
under the low lights of a last waltz.

So the refusees made a show
of their failure to see-a-girl-home
took their birthday suits to the ink-black Channel,
navigated by the blink of the Royal Sovereign

and the sweep of the promenade lights
around the bay to Beachy Head.

Even earlier in the evening there were some of the opposite sex who might take cruel advantage of you when, thinking you had done quite well both to dance and talk with the required nonchalance, you asked if you could now buy her a drink. She agreed to this further extension of your acquaintance and proceeded to ask for the most expensive drink on the board, a Pimms Number One, after which she soon drifted back to her mates or danced with another man for the rest of the evening. Ouch! In time it became a colloquialism. 'I saw you getting up close to that girl in the yellow dress earlier, What happened?' 'Oh, yeah, she was a Pimms Number One!'

Shops and Shopping

As the wartime austerity gradually lessened so the town became more prosperous. New businesses opened; old retailers returned with a smile and maybe a more willing service than before. Toyshops re-opened and for the first time a specialist sports equipment shop appeared at the re-built southern end of Sackville Road.

One year, the retailers association ran a shop-window competition as part of its Christmas celebrations. In each window display two objects that would never normally be on show were tucked away amongst the usual items so that they did not too obviously stand out. One of these was a piece of card with a single letter on it; the other was something anomalous to the rest of the contents in that particular window, like a slipper between the biscuit tins in a grocers's window or an apple among the suits and jackets in a gents outfitters' display. To enter the competition one had to identify all the twenty shops with such oddities, name the objects and arrange the letters to make a Christmas greeting, all carefully detailed on the entry form. It was a challenging task. Sometimes the objects did not seem to be that much different from the normal window goods, as though the shopkeepers didn't really want you to win the game. Then the letters might be partially hidden so you weren't sure if this particular shop was one of the twenty or not. Oh yes, and the twenty shops participating were not actually named, so we had to scrutinise every shop window on all the main shopping streets, with critical care in order to locate the special items.

One of my mates and I, myself, put a good few hours into this. We got the Christmas message, but were still uncertain about some of the misplaced objects with the result that a couple of them were more guesses than firm conclusions. We cursed the duplicity of the shopkeepers – or was it of the organisers? Anyway the entry forms were duly submitted. A week later we received a letter to say we had each won a

prize. Our endeavours had paid off. My prize was a sitting at a local photographer's portrait studio. The photos, one on the front cover of the book, showed a fresh-faced young man, suited with collar and tie for the occasion wearing a slightly truculent look which was indicative of the generally challenging approach I took to most rules and regulations in my 'teen years.

Devonshire, Western and Sackville Roads.

This three-sides-of-a-rectangle of roads were and still are Bexhill's main shopping streets. Appropriately, it seemed to me at that time, Sackville was both geographically and socially inferior to Devonshire which had the largest stores, Sainsburys, The International, Boots and Longleys in particular, whilst Western was intermediate, again in both respects with a good variety of well used shops but nothing on quite the grander scale of Devonshire. From our house in Windsor Road Sackville Road gave direct access to the sea, a virtue in itself as I saw it. The only shop of any size was Green's haberdashery dealing also in cloth and fabrics for household furnishing, clothes and other sewing items. In my earlier years, when still obliged to accompany my mother on her shopping expeditions, I was fascinated by the cash collection system in Greens. There were no counter tills. Instead her money and invoice were cupped and sent on an overhead system of wires to a central enclosed desk where it was checked and returned with change and receipt. The assistant despatched these smart wooden cups by pulling on an overhead lever. At this point it whizzed away like a busy little tram only to come back in a minute or so. I always fancied a go on that system.

Grocers

Shopping for groceries was a personal and almost private business. My mother had a red soft-covered notebook, about six inches by four with twenty or so lines to the page. She

wrote a weekly order for all our consumables except for butcher's meat, bread and milk. One of us would take the book to Love's Stores on Western Road on a Tuesday for delivery in a cardboard box a day or two later. Her list, which ran to fifteen items or more, included mostly dry goods like tea, sugar, cocoa, biscuits and cereals. It also asked for jams and marmalade, butter and margarine and cheese, usually cheddar. The cost of this order ran to something over five shillings and never more than ten, except perhaps for the week or two before Christmas when there would be festive 'extras'.

Mr Love was jocular man, white coated and heavily jowled. He called me 'Sunny Jim", as I read it then, which I found irritating because my name wasn't Jim and I couldn't work out that I was sunny, either. Also it meant that he hadn't taken the trouble to find out my real name even though my family name was clearly written on the cover of the order book. His real message was to remind me of my lower place in the pecking order and he might have been close to giving me a patronising pat on the head after he had briefly scanned the list to see if he had all the items in store and sent me on my way with a message that Camp Coffee would be in later on that week. He was, I felt, awkward with kids like us, but his business thrived, he was the nearest grocery to our end of Windsor Road and almost opposite Rouse's lending library which my Mum also made regular use of.

Sainsbury's.

There were, of course, several other groceries in town, including Hall's on Sackville Road and both Sainsbury and The International Stores on the up-market Devonshire Road. Sainsbury's had a reputation for high quality foods and seemed out of our reach, financially and socially. It was for the classier residents – those who lived on the west side of town, Collington, South Cliff and Cooden, for example. All customer service was over a counter. The customer was always regaled with 'Sir' or 'Madam' and other attentions

performed as a matter of course and with no apparent intention of currying favour.

On the dairy counter, for example, a well-groomed gentleman dressed in collar and tie a tailor-made blue and white striped apron, quite possibly wearing straw boater would use a wire to cut you exactly six ounces of Gorgonzola cheese from a larger segment, wrap and seal it in greaseproof paper with all the sleight of hand of the conjuror that he really was. Butter from a large block was reduced to the precise half-pound you asked for swiftly shaped into a neat little brick with wooden butter-pats cased and delivered across the white marble counter with the same careful offering up you would have expected from the handing over of a piece of precious jewelry.

Sainsburys had a very different atmosphere from other grocery stores in town. It consisted of two large halls each with two counters running their length, each reaching up into what would have been first floor ceilings in the adjacent buildings. The spacious areas between the counters were tiled in a black and white mosaic , and, like the marble counters themselves, cold and echoey, reflecting every cut, chop, or pat that delivered the goods over the glass barricaded counters. The place was cool but clean; both busy and efficient; unique on our high street.

Hall's Grocers

Mr Hall owned of the smaller groceries near the sea end of Sackville Road. He was well-known around the town because he did his own deliveries using a trade bicycle with a large basket fitted into a special frame over the front wheel. Such bikes were not unusual for deliveries of goods. I used one myself for a year or so on a Saturday morning to deliver joints of meat to householders for Oliver, the Butchers on Windsor Road. These bikes were unwieldy beasts, susceptible to high winds and icy roads, the more so when fully loaded.

What was unusual, not to say spectacular, was that Mr Hall (I knew him only by that name!) had lost a leg, I believe in the First World War, and rode his delivery bicycle using only his good leg for propulsion. His gammy leg rested vertically on a pedal at the end of a fixed crank whilst his good leg was strapped to the other pedal so that he could pull as well as push, so to speak. He was a proud man, well groomed, still of military bearing and he made no fuss about his remarkable prowess. He and his bicycle were a familiar duo around the town and I guess his 'carry-on' British spirit was widely admired, probably increasing patronage in his shop.

Sporting Attractions

Despite the impoverished post-war conditions we found ourselves forced to accept, there was in Bexhill a good number of sporting clubs which a teenager like myself could join. Racket sports were played in parts of the town, though squash was rather more exclusive and therefore less available than tennis or badminton. Ironically, I did get to play squash though, because I was a member of Bexhill Rowing Club. A couple of the senior members of BRC, Maurice Love, brother of the aforementioned grocer, and Reg Marshall, both players of a decent standard, arranged an evening at the White Rock Courts adjacent to the Swimming Pool at St. Leonards. The intention would be to maintain a degree of fitness through the winter months and in preparation for the following summer's regattas. I am afraid this weekly excursion achieved only small gains in stamina or reduction of waistline the latter of which would have been immediately offset by the drinks consumed in the bar at the end of hostilities. When I notice what happens at BRC today with their high intensity work on ergos or rowing machines (followed, of course, by unrivalled and even world-wide success on the water) I guess we were literally only playing at getting fit!

A few mates and myself did play tennis on the Egerton Park hard courts. These were occasional appearances, characterised more by effort and competitiveness than skill or understanding. Remember there was no TV then so the only players that we saw were grown-up versions of ourselves, and probably little better in the growing up. I guess badminton, too, was played in the church and school halls and larger spaces then, much as it is now, but it never came my way or rather I never went its.

On the other hand table tennis did, to a good standard and in my part of the town at a centre we knew as the Church Army. For myself, the Church Army, I confess, referred principally to a building in Station Road and not much more. I did not embrace the religious movement or, regretfully, even the essence of brotherhood or any other related cause of spiritual or social worth. No, despite the valiant and possibly soldierly efforts in welcome and recruitment offered by a certain Captain Howe who managed the Centre, me and my mates were only there for the beer, well, not the beer, (it was TT up there), but the tea, sandwiches and, most important of all the snooker and table tennis.

The Church Army boasted two good snooker tables including all the gear and proper lighting. It also owned two of the best, permanently installed table tennis tables in town. None of your dining room tables divided by a row of upside down books, here; not even a full-size fold-away, roll-away table which I would have been singularly and distinctively proud to own if my back-yard had been a bit bigger and my dad a bit richer. No, these were the real McCoy, top class, almost immovable structures with solid, fast surfaces allowing a reliable bounce for consistency of play; all with plenty of space around making it into a mini arena for the best players. And some of the best players played there.

One such was Eddie Blackwell, back then the champion of Bexhill. Eddie was, and perhaps still is quite small in stature, modest in demeanour and quietly spoken. He was also fast

around the table, ever watchful and most consistent in his shots. He had all the strokes and, most important of all, he loved the game at which he was good enough to represent Sussex.

The snooker was a lesser attraction and always proceeded by heavily laid instructions from Captain Howe as to our use of the hall. Captain was a tall portly man whose uniform was grey and not dissimilar to the Mao suits worn by the older Chinese communists, though better tailored and smoother material. He had a lugubrious face which I suppose was not too surprising if he spent most of his day dealing with the likes of us. But he was a patient man who understood us rather better than we understood him.

Another patient and worthy sportsman was Reg Cane, JP. I had regular contact with Reg as a member of the Bexhill Amateur Athletic Club when I competed in road and cross-country running events as a teenager, also playing with Bexhill Minors football team at one point. Reg was a plasterer by trade and a sportsman by choice. He and a few others were instrumental in building the sizeable Athletic Club's sports' centre in the thirties. For Reg, a bachelor, the Athletic Club was a life long investment. He never gave up in his encouragement, coaching and support of other athletes, gymnasts, footballers and boxers in particular. After an evening race or practice run he spent hours massaging tense muscles, dealing with injuries or even chatting in his knowledgeable way about developing skills and fitness for sport. Not surprisingly then, he was also a Justice of the Peace, rightfully so because he understood people, especially young men who appeared in front of his bench and was able to administer justice with fairness and common sense. He was a softly spoken gentle man, universally popular and widely recognised for all that he did in the town.

Bert Pratt and the The Bexhill Rowing Club.

In my fourth year at the Grammar School, the latter half of 1947, I joined Bexhill Rowing Club, became, in fact, a skinny cox boy, still light enough to be a relatively small burden to the men's fours but bright enough to steer a straight course with the minimum of deviation and drag and to cope with wind, waves and awkward turns which are essential features of sea-racing. And all of that started with my cousin, Bert.

Because he was some 14 or 15 years older than me, I knew him as Uncle Bert and at this time he worked as a plumber in the family business of J. Pratt and Sons and had done so both before the War and since his return from active service in North Africa and Europe. He was something of hero for me. I was aware from other family members of his progress through the conflict and of various incidents and stories that made their way home despite wartime restrictions on the passage of information of this kind ('Careless Talk Costs Lives').

Bert would drop into 9 Windsor Road to see my father, most likely to discuss the job in hand or the next one or sometimes, I suspected to say hello to us boys and my mother who in any case had a role in taking telephone messages and meeting customers. Occasionally he would, out of the corner of his mouth, ask me if I wanted a bet on some horse race, especially on Derby or the Grand National days: a secret arrangement between the two of us because betting on horses was not approved of in our house. Bert was able to operate on a 'mates' level' with me which my father, partly because of his deafness and partly I think because of his own upbringing and partly, again, because I was the more rebellious of his two boys, was not.

So I can't imagine what combination of circumstances found me, a totally inexperienced and unskilled fourteen year old acting as plumber's mate during one of the school holidays. Sure, my Dad must have agreed to this. He knew I was

prepared to work for money. I did a paper round every day of the week and two on Sundays. Did he think I might still choose to join the business despite my Mother's determination that neither of us should? Did he recognise his own shortcomings as a dad and decide that some time spent with Bert would make up for these. Whatever he did think Bert became a more significant figure in my life. He treated me as an equal; made jokes about my incompetence at the same time good naturedly showing and explaining how the job could be done.

His expressions of frustration when a screw or a bolt was rusted in and had become fast, were a treat. In between grunts and snorts as his screwdriver or spanner slipped off or locked onto the immovable object he would say 'Dear Mother, (like he was writing a letter), It's a bastard!' (short pause) then (like he was reading a letter back from his mother) 'Dear Son. So are you!' On another occasion he might start again with 'Dear Mother .... I was going to send (grunt) you a postal order (grunt) for ten shillings from my pay (another grunt), but I went and sealed the envelope (final grunt) before I remembered.

From time to time he told me of his exploits with Bexhill Rowing Club, especially in racing at regattas around the Kent and Sussex coastline ranging from Herne Bay in the North coast of Kent round to Deal, Dover and Folkestone and along the coast to the Hastings, Eastbourne and seaside towns west to Southsea in Hampshire. One such regatta was held at Shoreham on the River Adur. Rowing in the Junior Fours event Bert told me how his Bexhill crew were neck and neck with the local favourites as they rounded the final bend to shoot the last bridge. The Shoreham cox decided there was not enough water, because of the falling tide, on the inside arch and took the longer course out in midstream through the second arch. The Bexhill cox decided to go for the shorter course. It was a hair-raising passage. On one side of the boat the oars were scraping on sand and rock; on the other they clashed with the metal supports of the bridge.

Somehow they kept the boat going, emerging with the small advantage the cox boy had calculated they might gain. It was still neck and neck but they managed to hold onto that small lead all the way to the finishing line.

Novice Fours winners Hastings Regatta 1948, Alan Seccombe, Arthur West, Ken Meads, Ray Orsman and myself as coxswain

What a brilliant story! The way Bert told it had me hooked and, as I now think he intended all along, I needed no further incentive to get down to the clubhouse on the sea front and be introduced to members of the Club. Thus I became first a coxswain, and then, within a year or two, a rower with a commitment to a crew of four, all but one, boys from my school.

Our young and very light crew was hardly taken seriously by the older members who were in their mid to late twenties and mostly had returned from war service. Some of these had won novice ('maiden' in river rowing) and 'junior' races before WW2 thus were obliged to compete now in the junior-senior and senior categories, as was Bert himself. They were half a generation and a world apart from us 16-year-olds.

They were the men; we, the boys. They were the bigger and stronger; we the smaller and weaker. We were indulged with a certain amount of good humour, To keep us in our place we were dubbed the "Ovaltineys". One day we would turn things around.

Meanwhile I coxed a Junior-senior four in a regatta at Eastbourne in August 1947. We came third. It took the first novice crew more than a year to win and move up to Junior Status, when I coxed them to victory at Hastings. A second 'mens' novice crew still took precedence over us Ovaltineys as we hauled a heavy pre-war boat, the Hubert Nash, around the coast, unable to offer a challenge to the leaders. Our turn came when the second novice crew won. At last we were got to row a competitive boat and we won Novice fours at the end of the summer in 1950.

On July 21st 1951 we rowed in the Junior Fours event at Bexhill Regatta' It was a choppy sea. Our 'A' crew, heavier by far than we 'Ovaltineys' found the going difficult. They shipped water, struggled through to the finish. We seemed to skip over the waves and were soon in the lead. The 'B' Crew, the Ovaltineys, had beaten the 'A' crew. It was a first and last triumph. Two days later I was conscripted into the Royal Air Force to do the then compulsory National Service. It was the last time the Ovaltineys rowed together.

The Ovaltineys, L-R Myself, Colin Stanford, Maurice Frazer, Tony Gostage. Coxswain Micky Orchard

PART 3: NINE WINDSOR ROAD

What was family life like at 9 Windsor Road in those immediate post-war years? My grandmother died just before I was born, Aunt Mercy, as we shall see, had been banished to Battle, my grandfather passed away in 1943 and from then on we were an independent family of four. My brother, Reg and I, now in our 'teens,' increasingly occupied more physical and social space. After 1943 we could have had separate bedrooms but we billeted a soldier, in preparation for D-day, for some months and so it was later still that I eventually claimed and moved into the back bedroom as the sole occupant.

Our 'Greenhouse' and Kitchen

Here, I overlooked a slated outhouse which had been incorporated into the rear of the main dwelling to provide space for laundry and an untidy workshop, but also turned seamlessly into a glass-roofed greenhouse running to the boundary wall with the Fosters, our neighbours, to the south. There were a few plants on high shelves at that end of the extension and it always smelt of geraniums. Strange, therefore, that we called the whole extension 'the Greenhouse' because so little of it was glass and less still actually housed anything green. Mostly it served as a thoroughfare to the kitchen and the rest of the house instead of the original 'back' door which was located at the side. Otherwise our three bikes (my mother didn't ride) were stored handily for exit to the alleyway that ran between the rows of terraced houses fronting Windsor and Reginald Roads.

The laundry end of this extension also housed a copper for washing clothes and a mangle for removing most of the water from them before hanging on the line in our tiny

outside yard. A significant beginning to war-time and pre-war Mondays was that a fire had to be made, lit and fuelled well enough to warm water for washing or even boiling of all our dirty clothing. But by the time we were in our teens my father had put up a wall to seal off this end of the extension from the glazed area in order to convert it into a much needed bathroom. Previously, the only bath in the house was under a removable table top in the kitchen, just as the only basin was a stone sink adjacent to it. This sink was used for every kind of washing - hands, bodies, vegetables and other foods, table and kitchen ware, even by me, for cleaning the mud from my football boots!

This conversion also removed the need for an old fashioned and foul-smelling downstairs toilet which had been located in a short passageway between kitchen and outhouse. The toilet bowl was tall and conical, funnelling down to a narrow exit without, I imagine, the provision of U-bend below which would have partly accounted for its unsavoury presence! But this disreputable facility had probably been there since the house was built eighty years before. I grew up with it as one of the many 'givens' of our life, never questioning its appearance or hygiene until something better was in place.

The kitchen contained an old-fashioned coal-fired range with oven to one side and a cooking hob above. However, sometime in the late thirties a gas oven and hob was installed in one corner making the old range obsolete or at least less often used, until it was removed altogether. Its removal created a strangely empty and useless space, only four feet high, some two feet in depth. Of course, the kitchen had been built around such a range. Once it had been a focal point throwing out light and heat, for drying and airing clothes as well as baking and boiling. It felt like the heart and soul of the place had gone. Although the recess was then repainted green, my mother's favourite colour, the kitchen itself, now cold and lifeless, seemed to mourn this loss.

On the chimney breast above this vacancy was an imposing school or station clock, disproportionately large for our twelve feet by ten feet kitchen, but restoring some purpose and character to its space. It may well have been a legacy of Great Grandfather Grant who was a clockmaker and whose clocks my brother, Reg, discovered in recent years on the walls of one or two Sussex pubs. Our clock was a going concern and wound religiously every Saturday evening along with the grandfather clock at the top of the stairs and other mantelpiece clocks in the downstairs rooms.

The mantelpiece below this clock supported a few small pots one of which was a Pratt Ware meat paste container depicting a hunting scene. This was used to deposit spent matches after lighting the gas hob and I thought nothing more about it until years later when my mother suggested I might like to have it. I don't think she knew the image transfer process bore our family name, less still that such items have since become collectable and even valuable in a few instances.

Next to that stood a matchbox holder which I had laboriously constructed in woodwork lessons in my last year at primary school, an object of which I was justly proud for, unlike my brother, Reg, I had no great sympathy with wood. My attempts at sawing, cutting and jointing seemed to antagonise those grainy fibres. The small lengths of deal would rebel against every tool I applied to them, raising ugly splinters when I tried to plane, shedding corners that my chisel was not required to shed and sporting unsightly sawmarks where my saw had penetrated a stroke too far in creating the shoulder for a housing joint.

On a further two walls of the kitchen, positioned within a foot of the ceiling were shelves, which, during the summer and autumn were gradually stocked with Kilner Jars of seasonal fruit and jams from wild blackberry bushes or cultivated berries such as blackcurrants or gooseberries from our allotment in London Road. Before sugar was rationed

and when, once again, it became readily available, these two shelves were loaded with fifty or sixty bottles to keep us in good supply throughout the year. Jam was an alternative rather than a complement to butter on a slice of bread. We were not allowed to butter our bread and then cover the same slice with jam. That was my grandfather's ruling. The bread absorbed more jam this way – perhaps that was his intention. It was just one of those practices that I never became aware of until old enough to visit friends' tables and discover that other families did things differently.

So, a slice of unbuttered bread was commonest and least well regarded in our house and therefore more readily on offer. When, for example, we came home from school or playing outside complaining of hunger and with still an hour to endure before tea (we had 'tea', not dinner, as an early evening meal), my mother would always say, 'There's plenty of bread in the larder', knowing that we would have to be desperate to take her up on this offer and guessing that we would probably choose to wait for tea time.

Another aspect of the kitchen which became strange in retrospect was that the far end exit to a passageway and thence to the front hall was adjacent to a door opening onto our coal 'cellar' It was no cellar, in fact, simply the space under the stairs! So the coal was kept right in the centre of the house – handy but dirty. When the coal man came to deliver, everybody had to be out of his way:

Of course, he came the back way,
horse and cart waiting on the road.
while he clomped up the alley,
through the daytime open gate,
past Mallows bike repairs,
across our little back yard and
into the ever narrowing space
we called the greenhouse,

ducked his head as he stepped up and
passed the toilet door into the kitchen
where clean linen and other airing
had already flown before him.

His heavy clothes, dense as his sack
reeked of coal, stifled breath.
A black giant, slowing
as he reached the cellar door,
knowing precisely what space he
and his load would occupy, bent
into the gap; grunted from the effort
of crouching and leaning, easing
forward when the coal began to slip
over his head with a roar as the sack
upended; shiny black chunks onto concrete;
one or two jumping back to the kitchen floor.

The white of his eyes reveal him
as he stands, now fully upright;
palms coins into a leather purse;
hands over a dust thumbed invoice
and relief as the house settles again.

The Middle Room

Beyond the kitchen was our middle or living room, occupied for most of the waking day by at least one of us and usually all for breakfast dinner and tea in particular. At some time before mine Grandad had partitioned the living room to create a passageway from kitchen to the front of the house with a door into the living room at the far end. He had fixed a dado rail on either side of this passage, which made it into a mini-gymnasium for me to lift up onto hands and arms to swing or walk myself along its length. However, before I started at secondary school, the partitioned wall had been removed along with the elaborate multi-shelved mantelpiece which ran almost to the ceiling and the whole room redecorated to make the most of the light from the single

west-facing window. My dad also installed an old rolled-top desk in the corner nearest to that window at which he frequently sat struggling with the paperwork of the building and decorating business of which he was now the sole owner.

Behind him, on its own little shelf, stood a telephone, with a wooden box for neighbour's contributions when they came in asking to use it. Answering and phoning out were exclusively my mother's duty, adding a sizeable burden to her already busy working day. Dad was often out working but even when indoors he was unable to use the phone because of his deafness. It was also true that the quality of electronic speech on the telephone, its unfamiliarity to most people and the absence of any non-verbal information in what seemed to some as a remote and unnatural medium of communication, made other people anxious about using it, even those with normal hearing. One had to get used to it.

On the other side of the chimney breast was a floor to ceiling built-in cupboard. The upper shelves housed all the everyday tableware, except cutlery which was stored in a nearby sideboard. In the bottom of that cupboard were a few bottles of spirits, taken out only at Christmas, that is until Reg and I, as teenagers, found them to be complementary finale to a Saturday night's entertainment, such as a dance or a visit to the cinema.

The Hall

Immediately opposite to the living room door and at the foot of the stairs the hall wall supported a large wood-framed full length mirror, some three feet wide. It was big enough to momentarily convince a stranger that there was still another exit to the hall when, to our occasional amusement, one briefly made to turn into that illusory space.

The front hall was floored with parquet tiles, furnished with the usual umbrella and coat stand and a large square made-

to-measure coir mat fitted in the space next to the door. A leaded glass light above the front door showed the name of our house 'Orznash' to those on the outside. This referred to Orznash Farm, at Crowborough where my Grandmother was brought up. Grandad had chosen to keep the connection when the house was built for him in the latter part of the nineteenth century. A hand-painted mural of a country scene, including sheep, above the dado rail and extending several feet back from the door probably served a similar purpose. On the opposite wall another telephone provided a direct line to the office at Pratt & Sons builder's yard in Reginald Road. This phone was still there, though no longer in use by the time I was in my teens, though by then, also an object of amusement to my school mates.

The Front Room

The front room itself was little used. It may seem surprising to later generations that this should be the case - a large well decorated space with a built in display cabinet, good quality furniture and carpets, a handsome French mid-nineteenth century gold clock, two original Victorian oil paintings and a larger landscape oil incorporating a small working clock into the church tower of the village depicted in the foreground. The 'picture clock" also contained a musical box, operated by a string below the frame, to play either 'The Bluebells of Scotland' or Rule Britannia', depending, I guess, on your mood – romantic or patriotic!

The point was that the front room was kept for special occasions or particular people. Customers calling to discuss work or pay bills were received in the front room allowing the rest of the house to operate independently. Salesmen were also accommodated here though they probably would not be offered a seat. Any other stranger who could not be met and dealt with on the doorstep was invited into the front room. This room was only suitable for short visits because for most of the year it was cold and unwelcoming.

At Christmas, though, it came into its own. A coal fire was lit in the hearth and maintained for several days running; paper chains and decorative lights were hung; the oval walnut table carried bowls of fruit, assorted nuts, sweets, packeted dates, sugared almonds, Turkish delight as well as a variety of drinks including a siphon of soda water. These, of course, including the 'keeping apples' brought down from the attic, were only seen at Christmas. Once eaten or drunk there would be no more similar spreads until the following year. In this respect, at least, our Christmas was very special!

Upstairs was the front bedroom looking over Windsor Road. During my life at 9, Windsor, it had always belonged to my Mum and Dad. It was their sanctuary and commanded a certain privacy, being the last bedroom to be reached by the landing and retreat overlooking the stairs:

Inheritance

When Grandfather lost Hepzibah
the front bedroom became theirs
with its tall cupboards and the big bed
I was born in.

Above their heads, a white-lace
and blue valentine, framed to hold
the permanence of some day
before mine .....

Above this and the centre bedroom my Grandfather had built yet another flight of stairs to access the roof space converted into a fourth bedroom. This we called the 'Attic'.

The Attic

A common practice of my parents and their friends and relations was to 'drop in' on each other unannounced and mostly without prior notice, which, in any event, could only have been by a letter through the post since few of them had telephones and those that had might be reluctant to use them both because of the expense and the lack of familiarity, not to say anxiety about talking to a body that wasn't actually in front of them. Thus locals on errands of business or pleasure might 'drop in' to see either of my parents on weekdays, more probably in an afternoon when the daily chores were completed.

At week-ends, perhaps on a Sunday afternoon, others from further afield might appear on our doorstep unexpectedly, having made their journey by public transport or motor car, for example from Cooksbridge, Pevensey or Hastings. If an extended visit, including a meal ('I hope you can stay for tea with us') wasn't possible because they themselves were about to go out, or other visitors had arrived earlier, then a cup of tea would be found and the conversation confined to about an hour. There was no embarassment about this – indeed it was simply part of the comings and goings that businesses, neighbours, family and friends normally undertook. Most contact between people was face-to face, except for the exchanges over our rather high garden walls where faces were unseen and words flew like invisible birds from one back door to another.

In this respect we lived in an open house where a welcome was extended to one and all. The same welcome was offered to our boyhood friends whom my mother got to know and had to approve of. None of our friends was ever thrown out, though some were less popular with her than others. There were both social and geographical barriers. Some were seen as shady characters because they were on the wild side – perhaps less than lawful in the absence of fathers earlier in their lives. Others were persona non grata simply because

they lived in the wrong part of town. If you came from Sidley that alone raised her suspicions; to actually live on Buxton Drive, Sidley, even though it only led up to Sidley and wasn't an integral part of the ancient village, was, in itself almost incriminating! It must have caused her a little anxiety when Reg first brought his girl-friend Hazel, whom he later married, into our house. She and her parents lived in Sidley and were, of course, as were all but a few of that worthy community, highly respectable and respected members of the village.

However, we established a small number of close friends and these, having made themselves known would proceed upstairs and upstairs again to a room in the roof space, known as the attic. Reg and I had gained increasing access to this as we grew old enough to negotiate the steep winding staircase until it eventually became a kind of den where we could entertain friends and play together.

Aunt Mercy

The attic had been constructed to accommodate Aunt Mercy, an elderly deaf and dumb spinster who was, I believe, Grandad's sister or sister-in-law. He had seen it as his duty to take her in at some point, but I guess it didn't work quite so well once we boys had arrived on the scene. She was not an easy person to deal with, being prone to outbursts of temper or anger understandably I guess now, with the continual frustrations caused by her disability. Anyway, toward the end of the 1930's, she was taken to live in 'The Workhouse' as I was told, near Battle. My Dad and I once visited her there and I watched them using the old alphabetical sign language to converse together. At this distance, of course one can only feel compassion for all six of us living in that small terraced house, called 'Orznash':

For Aunt Mercy

Orznash must have been
a kind of madness;
a farmhouse in the Weald
to be remembered

in our terrace, close
to the centre of town:
an irony, a misfit,
as was Mercy herself

who railed and gibbered
from her attic space,
remote from the kitchen
unless it was

to polish the silver
with such a frenzy
both she and it
wore to the bone.

Deaf and dumb,
a sister-in law, she was
dutifully accommodated,
spilt her frustration into

our lives, until one day
she vanished from the house,
banished to the workhouse
to be seen and heard

only when we chose.

Christmas Apples

Once vacated, Mercy's room became a repository for old books and the remains of her furniture. Then, every year in the Autumn several dozen apples were neatly spaced out on old newspaper across a section of floor close to the top of the creaky staircase. My Dad called these 'keepers' rather than 'eaters', because when first picked in September or October they were sour and hard, but by mid-December they had become softer and sweeter, although one or two also became brown and rotten.

Whatever their condition we understood that they were not to be touched until Christmas when a few were taken down in time for the festive table in the front room, which was used as our living room for the Christmas Holiday. Here they occupied a place of special merit alongside nuts, dates, candied fruit, marzipan shapes, sugared almonds and various luxuries that never found our table during the rest of the year.

Not that Christmas was our first taste of the forbidden fruit. Reg and I (I am afraid it would have been at my suggestion and instigation, sealed by his reluctant agreement. Crime is always that bit easier to commit if one has an accomplice and guilt shared is guilt halved) had already plundered the store and rearranged the rows to cover our tracks. An accusation did follow after one or two incidents, but I decided that my Dad was basing it on impression rather than calculation. So our complete denial of guilt was enough to end the matter if not to ease our feelings of dishonesty.

A Boys' Den

The attic became a regular meeting place for the two of us and our friends. One Christmas, Dad gave us a small billiard table with cues and all the equipment including a proper scoreboard which hung on the wall at one end of the roof-confined space. He, himself, played snooker at the British

Legion Comrades Club in Town Hall Square twice a week and although he rarely played billiards with us he encouraged us to enjoy and respect the game as he did. The games between pairs of us were long and hard fought. The smaller-sized billiard balls were difficult to control and less susceptible to manoeuvre by the use of spin. The highest break ever made up there was only about 30; even that must have involved one or two lucky pots or cannons.

Next to the billiards scoreboard and immediately under the apex of the sloping ceilings we had a darts board, which was often used for intense competitions between us. It was at this end of the attic that the stairs came up through the floor. It never occurred to us or anybody else that a dart board adjacent to the stairs presented any kind of a hazard, though now again a dart would hit the wire framing of the target bed and rebound backwards or, even less frequently, sideways down the stairs which amounted to an irritating delay while someone fetched the stray dart. Except that one such rebounding dart flew straight into the forearm of one of our friends, Don Bowles just as he was arriving on the top steps. It was a memorable incident. When he removed the dart which seemed to have plugged into his arm more or less head on, there was a momentary spurt of blood like a miniature geyser. This impressed us all; it was not what we expected; blood didn't shoot out like that! Then it scared us too, less, I have to say, in fear for Don's safety than for what parents might say or do if they got to know about it.

The final phase of our occupation of the Attic space saw us into aeromodelling. Our passion here lasted a couple of years in my case and rather longer for Reg and other friends who pursued it into the realms of powered and even radio-controlled flight. Initially, though, we built gliders with balsa wood frames covered with tissue paper or fabric, in turn strengthened by brushing with a sweet-smelling cellulose acetate over its surface. These craft were still not robust and it was judicious to wait for a relatively calm day for their first flights when they could be towed, kite-like, into the sky up

to 100 feet when they were released to travel for as far and as long as possible, particularly in competition.

Having spent many hours in painstaking construction I was usually impatient to get the new model airborne, consequently making a bad decision about the suitability of flying conditions. More than once I had to return to the attic with a plane requiring major repairs. Perhaps the few successful flights achieved made it all worth while.

Home Entertainment

It is interesting to compare the media of the forties with what we have today. Obviously there have been many developments in the electronic world, most significantly in the visual screening of information. But it is also true that none of the media we used then has become entirely obsolete. The radio is a good example. It was predicted that with television widely available, nobody would listen to the radio, just as, a few decades earlier; radio itself would be the demise of newspapers. Neither, apparently, are electronic books reducing our appetite for the paper variety.

The Radio.

Apart from the telephone the only means of instant communication or amusement was by radio and, of course this was one-way only. My grammar school years preceded television and the radio was still important and much listened to. Most houses had a radio set. In our house it was switched on at specific times during the day. We listened to 'The News' at one-o-clock and six-o-clock. The war was coming to an end and the progress of the Allied land forces across Europe anticipating the final surrender was eagerly followed. The war was always on our minds and the radio was the most immediate and up-to-date source of news about it.

Other light entertainment shows were followed by millions of listeners. Workers Playtime, Variety Bandbox and Monday Night at Eight were three I listened to as were the regular comedy shows, It's That Man Again with Tommy Handley, Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh, Educating Archie and several others.

My favourite programme which was on every evening for 15 minutes was 'Dick Barton, Special Agent'. It began in 1946, went on long after I had lost interest in it and even survived a conversion to television in the 50's. Its heroes, Dick, Jock and Snowy (as Wikipedia aptly explains): 'solved all sorts of crimes, escaped from dangerous situations and saved the nation from disaster time and again.' My mates listened to that serial – it was important enough to be part of our daily exchanges and one had to keep up! I believe that 20 million people tuned in every evening at 6.45pm when it was at its zenith of popularity.

Carrying Accumulators

Our radio set, like others of that time, was powered by a lead acid accumulator, the size of an upstanding house brick, or even two, but somewhat heavier because its casing was made of thick glass and its internal plates of a lead compound. The other operative part was sulphuric acid, not always well contained by the casing. From time to time either Reg or I had to carry this battery to Boggis's shop on Sackville Road to be recharged or exchanged for one already charged. We didn't compete for the errand! The accumulator was heavy to carry and had to be kept upright which meant it was swinging from its handle somewhere around our knees so that aching arms were less of a concern than the danger of attack from leaking or spilt acid. There must have been a corporate sigh of relief from these child-carriers all over the country when it became possible to power radios by electricity directly from the mains socket in the living room.

Newspapers

The next most immediate form of communication was the daily newspaper. Almost every house bought a paper which was delivered through the letterbox first thing in the morning. The less respectable papers were the Daily Mirror (which my father took along with the even more disreputable News of the World each Sunday) and the Sketch, while the Times was thought of as the 'best' paper with the Daily Telegraph somewhere in between but 'better' again than the Daily Mail or the Daily Express.

I was brought up on the Mirror, revelled in its 'comic' strips, especially that of Jane whose sexy antics were thought to be morale raising for the fighting forces during WW2 and who was in the habit of losing her clothes, at least down to her underwear and on rarer occasions into the altogether. My other favourites were Just Jake, a ludicrous country squire whose frequent histrionic expressions, included 'Stap me!', which became a catchphrase at that time and Garth, a giant blond adventurer and time traveller who, at great peril to himself, was constantly in combat with terrestrial forces of evil. Pip, Squeak and Wilfred also figured in those days, but they seemed a bit naff to me and probably for the very young. On the other hand I tried to follow the adventures of Rupert Bear by sneaking a look at somebody else's Daily Express each morning on my paper-round.

The readers' letters column in the Mirror, Live Letters was monitored by a (presumably fictional) pair, the 'Old Codgers' whose pithy remarks and sardonic one-liners added sparkle to an otherwise conventional letters column. Vicky's Cartoon's were another focal point; I was interested in drawing and picture-making and could only wonder at the apparent ease and consistent volume of output achieved by the daily cartoonists. My favourite was Giles whose regular set of pudgy-faced characters, dominated by 'Grandma',

were beautifully drawn, usually had a topical point to make and were funny into the bargain.

A racing tipster called Bouverie published a daily forecast in the Daily Mirror alongside the runners and riders for the day's meeting, wherever that might be. Together with one of my school friends, John McCormack or 'Mac' as I knew him and Bouverie's tips I would place imaginary bets on each of the afternoon's six races. Mac and I competed to see who could win the most (or lose the least) on our selections. It was all rather tame until the day we stayed off school and took the train to Brighton Races to apply our shrewd judgments to the real event, to back flesh and blood rather than fancy names in the newspaper.

Now Brighton had a reputation as a course that suited favourites. However we were not side-tracked by this sort of soft-hearted propaganda. We believed we could beat the book and began by selecting horses at longer odds. We lost. In fact, we continued to lose our shillings on each of the first five races. Before the last race I changed tactics and backed the favourite, Beladorius was his name – I have reason to remember. Mac intended to retrieve all his losses on another starter, at 7-1. Beladorius won so I cut my losses. Mac remained cheerful in spite of losing both to me and the bookmakers – he was that kind of 'C'est la vie' spirit – but we never went racing again.

Books.

Books were neither as cheap nor as plentiful as they are today. Most working-class people did not own many books. There were a couple of dozen, mainly reference books on the top shelf (a medical book had an explicit reference to sexual intercourse in it!) of a glass fronted display cabinet in the front room. I had most of the 'William' books and other boys reading on a small hung bookshelf in my bedroom. We brought text books home from school to use for our homework but there was little else. My mother was quite

well read and usually had on novel on the go. These she borrowed from Rouse's bookshop and lending library just above the Infants School on Western Road There was no public library in Bexhill then and none until that same school was extended and redeveloped as one in 1951. My mum would send me to Rouse's with tuppence for a week-long loan of a novel and to return the one she had just read.

Records.

Popular and classical music were, of course, heard on the radio. Not often because there was only one broadcasting channel, the BBC Home Service, for all kinds of broadcasting. However you could buy 'gramophone records' to play in your own home. These were made of shellac and were played (in our case) on a wind-up 'gramophone' at 78 r.p.m. One side lasted only two or three minutes. The first record we ever bought in our house was "The Harry Lime Theme", played on a zither, by Anton Karas. On the 'B' or flip side of this record was 'The Cafe Mozart Waltz.' There were other shellac records in a little store under the turntable of the gramophone, many of them classical and totally out of my musical comprehension. More entertaining was one of Jack Payne and his Orchestra singing risque limericks or the more sexist ditties that began 'She was only a (tradesman's) daughter' as in 'She was only a welder's daughter, but she had acetylene legs!' How could I ever forget that?

Pets.

About the time this story begins, say 1943, our family became cat-owners, well, kitten owners at first – who would miss the joyful entertainment of a playful kitten? Dinky was my mother's initiative – a long haired ginger who took over the house in that imperious way that cats have. He was handsome, fastidious with his food and friends alike and amazingly adept at finding the best place in the sun or nearest the fire as the seasons came and went.

He was not much into rodent control, either. One night he caught a rat, brought it into the house and managed to let it escape somewhere in the kitchen. This happened in the chestnut season on a day when Reg and I had been out and brought back several pounds of these beauties which were left in a large bowl on the kitchen table. In the morning, not knowing at this point of Dinky's carelessness, we were astonished to find the bowl empty. My dad's suspicions of an intruder were well founded when the expert from the Council called, lifted a floorboard to catch the rat and revealed pile of our chestnuts. The rat must have worked all night to set himself up for winter. The bad news was that every single nut had toothmarks on it and all were deemed inedible.

Dinky's discomfort came, a year or so later when I was allowed to own a dog. Kim was a mongrel but close to a Welsh Collie in appearance with the usual puppy appetite for being everywhere and into everything. Dinky was put out, unhappy and had to become more selective in his choice of reclining spots, generally retreating to the higher ground. Eventually the mutually exclusive territories became well established and each tolerated the other. Even then, though, when Dinky was stretched out on the dining table his vindictive eye caught Kim passing and he could not resist dropping an apparently careless claw onto Kim's tail as she passed below, unaware of the danger from above. Kim would instantly turn about leap up and snarl. Dinky then withdrew inches enough to be out of reach, do one of those half-power cat-hisses signalling victory in a minor skirmish and job well done.

Unsurprisingly, Kim was not a friend to cats. I once caught her, only just in time, with next door's sizeable black cat in her mouth. The cat seemed undamaged, though possibly traumatised and certainly persuaded that our back yard was dangerous territory.

When she was in season, Kim became the object of desire for other males from miles around. I took her out on a short lead, but other dogs would dare to close within inches of her despite my shouting threats and whipping the loose end of the lead at their heads. We were at breakfast one morning when a strange dog appeared at the table. He had jumped over two gates, the first of which was about six feet high, found his way through an open back door and now presented himself to Kim before retracing his steps at speed. She ran after him through the door, cleared the backyard gate and charged the tall gate into the alley. She ended up just short of a clamber over the top and fell back so that I could reclaim her.

Kim went everywhere with me, apart from school. Morning paper-round, swimming in the sea, trips to Collington Wood or Galley Hill. She was part of the action. Too much, sometimes as she found it difficult to resist chasing cyclists and snapping at their ankles. They say that dogs are short sighted. If so, Kim was no exception. Once she ran down the first few sloping yards of the cliff at Galley Hill, intending to reach me at the foot, but unaware that the next forty feet was a sheer drop. Fortunately the foot of the cliff was also sloping so she was able to make a ski-jumper's landing and arrived at my side unharmed.

My parents made it clear from the beginning that owning a dog entailed responsibility. She needed a last walk at night-time and an outing in the day when I came home from school. This came harder as my Saturday nights got later and more heady. Arriving home near midnight I would sometimes find a note on the table: 'WALK THE DOG'!

Kim and Dinky